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Head-Center of the Silver Gang.

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CHAPTER I.

THE BEAUTIFUL TYPEWRITER.

CLICK, click, clickety-click, sounded the type-writing machine in the office of Jonas Hardman, ship chandler and commission merchant, South street, New York.

Rose Marling, a beautiful young woman, was the expert of the occasion, Mr. Hardman himself the dictating spirit of the machine.

Stern and absorbed, he sat before his grate-fire, a heap of freshly-opened letters from the afternoon mail before him, spitting out their answers sometimes jerkily, sometimes swiftly, and without a break for a minute or two at a stretch.

And, equally absorbed, without a break, did

A COUPLE OF SAFE-LOCK EXPERTS, WITH COLD CHISELS AND HAMMERS, WERE
TINKERING ABOUT THE DOOR.

the fair typewriter follow him with automaton-like fidelity. She was a young woman of twenty, a brunette, liberally and nobly proportioned, a silent strength of character mingling with the soft beauty of her face.

A weak-looking young man of about her own age was busied over some papers at a small desk but a few steps from where her deft fingers kept the machine at its rattling work. This was Ralph Marling, her twin brother, and weaker second self, as you might say, who held a subordinate clerkship in the great merchant's offices.

The bookkeeper occasionally peered in from his high desk in the outer office beyond, with a furtive admiration for the beautiful expert whose sincerity there was no mistaking. This was Horace Allen, Mr. Hardman's nephew, and also with an interest in the business. A tall, gentlemanly-appearing young man of twenty-eight or thirty, fair-skinned, and with a look of rugged honesty, but the reverse of handsome.

He was profoundly in love with Rose, who, however, had thus far persistently ignored the fact. Rose, to tell the truth, was wholly concerned in keeping her brother in order; and, notwithstanding that her worldly prospects would have been immeasurably brightened as Horace Allen's wife, her employer's nephew and heir seemed by no means the man she could have most cared for, had she had time or inclination to think of love.

"That is all," said Mr. Hardman, at last, and he tossed the letters over to Ralph Marling for filing and indorsement, with a swift look of dislike for the young man. "Bless me!" looking at his watch; "four o'clock already, and that remittance not yet arrived!"

Rose silently passed him the type-written letters for his signature, and, with a slight heightening of color, proceeded to rectify some hitch in her machine.

She had remarked the glance bestowed upon her brother, and perhaps knew it to be more or less deserved.

Mr. Hardman made the signatures with a look of satisfaction, and, the letters being presently ready for the evening mail, young Marling took his departure with them.

The merchant again glanced disapprovingly after the effeminate, dandified figure as it disappeared, and then, from his easy-chair drawn a little more closely to the snug fire, turned his eyes thoughtfully upon the young woman, who was now closing up her machine.

"Miss Marling," said he, in his wonted brusque, business-like way, "you can see if Mr. Allen wants you to assist him with his counting up. If not, you can call it a full day, and knock off."

She bowed, without answering, and obediently stepped into the outer office, his eyes still following her thoughtfully.

Mr. Hardman was a thick-set bachelor of more than middle age, with perhaps a lurking kindness of heart somewhere under his hard shell, and his cold gray eyes had softened a little in following the graceful figure of his beautiful typewriter through the doorway.

"What a splendid girl that is!" he grumbled, to himself. "I'd increase her salary, unsolicited, if it wasn't for keeping that worthless cub of a brother in my employment at her earnest solicitation. Poor girl! but for her he would go to the dogs altogether, I suppose. However, business is business, and if he comes in here half-slewed but once again, out he goes for good, neck and crop—Horace's entreaties to the contrary notwithstanding. Twins, too! Humph! apart from the family resemblance, who would suspect it? She must pass the whole of her cheerless, hard-working existence in the iron resolve to keep the fellow out of mischief. I suppose one would call her a sort of heroine in her way."

"No wonder Horace is so gone on her, as they say. By Jupiter! if I weren't nearly treble the girl's age and hadn't eschewed marriage on general principles, I might—Oh, Lord, what an old donkey I can be when I want to!—yes, might really furnish yet another ridiculous example of a rich old fool leading his pretty typewriter to the altar. Humph! but the girl is nobly beautiful and sedate!"

She had just swept past the door, only to return to the bookkeeper's desk, whence he once again heard her melodious voice soberly checking off some items of business as they were read off to her, whereupon Mr. Hardman resumed his mental soliloquy:

"Some mystery about the girl, too, I believe. Horace said something about her father having mysteriously died, or disappeared, or something of the sort. A once influential family of broken fortunes, eh? But, there's too many of that sort, and precious little good in any of 'em, I fancy. However, didn't he also hint of something of a romance?—of a criminal uncle of hers, who had ruined the father, and would now do anything to get the daughter in his power? Question of a rich estate, no less than of her beauty, too, I think Horace said. The deuce! how could he have discovered even that much when she is so reserved and reticent with him, no less than with everybody else? Poor Horace! if he only had better looks to back his worldly prospects—however, money would never dazzle

that girl, in any case, to my thinking. Now, if I were a little more interested in her on my own account, that slim detective who once did a good job for me—what was his name? Baldwin, Malden, Walden?—might speedily enough solve the mystery for a consideration. But, bless me! am I really getting soft-headed?"

Here he was interrupted by the bustling entrance of some one into the outer office, soon after which Horace Allen stepped to the door with a sealed Express package in his hand.

"That ten thousand dollars from the New Orleans firm at last," he said. "Just come by American Express!"

"What!" roared Mr. Hardman; "the money again, instead of a bill of exchange, and after banking hours, too?"

"Yes, uncle."

"Drat those old foggy shipping firms, anyway! Do they think I keep a bank-vault for storing money, like a miser in a melodrama? Why can't they do business by draft, as other folks do?"

"I don't know, uncle. However," with a smile, "cash isn't a bad thing to handle, and our safe is a strong one."

"True," in a mollified tone. What a mollifier is hard cash, anyway, not only in the mercantile world, but everywhere! "Get Rose—I mean, Miss Marling—to help you count it up; and then we can close up for the day."

He followed his nephew into the outer office, and stood near the railed and partly glass-partitioned inclosure, within which, the package having been opened, Miss Marling was assisting in the verification of its contents.

There were ten bank-note packages of a thousand dollars each, and as the notes were of comparatively small denomination, the recounting was something of a task.

While this was going on, Ralph Marling returned from his errand, and, hanging up his overcoat, which was dotted with snowflakes, at once resumed his desk in the adjoining office with an appearance of great assiduity.

The merchant glanced through the door at him with a scowl.

But, after a single covetous leer at the heap of money-packages on the edge of the high desk, the young man, pen in hand, was round-shouldered over his desk, with his nose buried in his work, in the hope that the three cocktails which he had imbibed during his brief absence had not been noticed in his face or walk.

Luckily for him, Mr. Hardman was at this juncture called to the front of the store by one of his shipping clerks.

When the merchant returned, the re-counted money had been placed in the safe, the doors of which were being closed by Horace, while Rose was putting on her cloak.

"Good!" he muttered, with a sigh of relief, and a contented look at the iron doors that were being carefully secured. "Believe I'll say good-night myself," which he forthwith did.

CHAPTER II.

SISTER AND BROTHER.

THE porters were closing the store, and as Mr. Hardman passed out he noticed Ralph Marling awaiting his sister's appearance.

He was about to say something harsh, when the young man, with an obsequious shuffle, turned to him a face so ghastly that he relented.

"Poor devil!" thought Mr. Hardman; "I know he's been drinking in business hours again, but then—he's such an insignificant little creature, and there's that brave girl to be considered." So, with a curt parting nod, he passed up the crowded street.

Darkness was coming on, and the flakes of a first snowfall were whirling in the cheerless air, it being in the early part of November.

Left to himself, Ralph Marling drew a long breath of relief, and then lighted a cigarette, while alternately casting an impatient look back into the store and a longing one up the street in the direction of a neighboring liquor saloon.

"Insignificant little creature" had characterized him pretty accurately. From his hat to his boots, with the half-sporting, half-dishdressing pretensions that were indicated, he seemed but a pitiful masculine reflection of the noble Rose, though of the same age as she. He was small and puny and ridiculously self-assertive, as a youth, while she was tall, vigorous and unconscious as a young woman; and their characters formed as striking a contrast at every point—the contrast of weakness with strength.

"I thought the old duffer was going to give it to me," muttered this hopeful young gentleman to himself, "but I've escaped. Why the deuce doesn't Rose come, or is she letting Horace grow spooney again, I wonder? Gad! if she would only marry him, and dip right into the Hardman pile, what a racket for me! Wonder if I'd have time to run up there to Kelly's for another ball."

In the mean time, Rose had started to quit the office when a few pleading words from Horace Allen had induced her to pause reluctantly.

He had put on his overcoat and hat, and came hesitatingly in to where she was standing by the inner office fire.

"Rose—Miss Marling!" he stammered.

"Yes, Mr. Allen," she quietly replied, and just a little wearily.

"Haven't I kept my word?" he exclaimed, flushing eagerly. "A whole week, and without my saying another word to you as—as to how I feel!"

"I thank you for it, Mr. Allen." Her head was bowed, her eyes lowered, and she was softly punching the rug with the point of the tightly-folded silk umbrella that she held in one small gloved hand, while the other hung listlessly by her side.

He cast a devouring look at her noble figure, standing there so picturesquely in the soft mingling of the fire-glow with the fading daylight.

"But I can't keep silent any longer, Rose!" he blurted out. "I love you to distraction—I must say it again!"

"Good-night, Mr. Allen!" and she coldly extended her hand.

"Wait!" desperately, for she had made a movement to go. "It is my—my want of good looks that you chiefly find objection to?"

"You have asked me that before," gently but firmly, "and I have told you—no. Besides," generously, "I do not find you bad-looking, and am sure that few other girls would."

He made a half-furious gesture, disdainful of her generosity.

"It is that—that brother of yours, then!" he exclaimed.

She winced a little, the color showing in the pure olive of her exquisite face, but not with anger.

"You mistake," she answered, slowly. "It is not that—not that alone."

"What is it, then?" desperately.

"It is this, Horace," for the first time addressing him by his given name, and looking him for the instant with kindly candor squarely in the eyes—"that I do not love you." And then, averting her gaze again: "One cannot order one's feelings in affairs of this sort, you know."

"Oh, yes, I know!" with a groan. "But stay—one minute more, Rose!" springing after her as she moved toward the door. "There is no other, no luckier fellow? Tell me that—you know what I mean."

"No, there is no other; I have told you that before."

"But wait! Do I divine aright, Rose? Your brother is not your only trouble and anxiety? You have some mystery in your past, some haunting misery?"

She started as if she had been stung, but recovered her composure almost instantly, while giving him a half-frightened, half-resentful glance.

"Good-evening, Mr. Allen!" and she moved resolutely, even brusquely, away.

He impulsively seized and pressed her gloved hand to his lips, and then she was gone.

"No matter," he muttered, between his clinched teeth. "I'll have her yet, if I have to wait and toil seven years for her, as did Jacob for Rachel of old!"

Rose Marling had joined her brother, while the latter, breathless from a hurried visit to the corner saloon, was sedulously chewing a clove behind his incipient mustache.

"Come!" she said, in the unconsciously-imperative tone that she had come to use with him. "It is late, and I shall have to do some little marketing before getting supper ready."

He went obediently, though with the attempt at a nonchalant swagger which it was his pitiful ambition to assume successfully.

They lived in Harlem. Once in the Elevated cars—where, the station being so far down-town, they were fortunate enough to secure seats, notwithstanding the rawness of the weather—even she was struck by an unusual ghastliness in her brother's face; but she said nothing, supposing that Mr. Hardman might have been taking him to task afresh with unwonted harshness before she had joined him at the store entrance.

Rose and Ralph occupied a cozy top-story flat not far from the Harlem River. It was substantially furnished with the relics of a ruined but once luxurious home in the South; and Rose's twenty dollars a week, as Mr. Hardman's typewriter and bookkeeper's assistant, together with her untiring energy and housewifely talent, were more than sufficient to make of it as attractive a domicile as a far worthier brother could have desired or deserved—had not Ralph's erratic temper and habits stood in the way of such a consummation, which they not infrequently did. However, she mostly managed to secure enough out of his ten dollars a week to pay the rent of the flat, which was only sixteen dollars a month. For the rest, she watched him like a hawk, while loving him like a sister, and there was nothing of his weak, selfish and frequently base character with which she was not pitifully and painfully familiar.

Having entered the flat and lighted the gas, for it was by this time night-dark, Rose busied herself with starting up a fire in the large kitchen stove, without removing her hat or cloak, this fire being sufficient to warm up all the communicating rooms.

Ralph, on his part, sunk into an easy chair whence he could observe her readily, drew a newspaper from his pocket, and lighted a fresh

cigarette. The stimulants he had surreptitiously imbibed were now getting in their work, and the unnatural paleness, whatever its cause, which had distinguished his face, had by now disappeared.

"What a luxury," he sighed, "this quiet smoke after those beastly Elevated cars, where a chappie can't do anything but watch out for his toes, or perhaps ogle a pretty work-girl."

The fire by this time being made, she eyed him, mournfully and sternly, without answering.

"You have been drinking again," she said—"and in business hours, too, in spite of what you so solemnly promised me!"

"I'll swear I haven't, Rose!" he replied, with composed mendacity. "But the deuce! what's the use of a fellow's trying and trying, when he gets nothing but suspicions for his pains?"

She bustled about the room to conceal the quiver of her lip, though she might have got used to his falsehoods by this time.

"Be sure to remain here till my return," she said at last, taking up a small basket. "I am going to the market."

"I shall not disappoint you, Rose," he replied, with sudden gentleness and even earnestness; for the ne'er-do-weel was susceptible to certain vague little twinges of conscience at times. "You'll find me right here."

And he began to look over the newspaper. She rewarded him with a grateful look, and went out.

Two or three minutes later, there was a cautious knock, and then, without awaiting a response, a man opened the door and entered.

A hugely corpulent middle-aged man, almost as broad as he was tall, yet with something about him suggestive of sinister activity, no less than of enormous physical strength. A very well-dressed man, too, handsomely featured, and with the expression of a masked fiend.

Ralph Marling started up in a sort of terror. "For God's sake, Uncle Max!" he exclaimed, "you mustn't come here! Oh, if Rose should even suspect that I know you, or even that you are in New York!"

CHAPTER III.

A BIT OF FAMILY HISTORY.

"THAT is all right," said the big man, composedly, and yet with the species of masterful caution or stealthiness that seemed to characterize him. "I saw Rose quit the building."

Ralph's uneasiness was unabated, his lips trembling, his ghostliness having returned. "She may be back in five minutes," he faltered.

"Three will suffice for me," coolly. "Stop your accursed trembling, you baby! Is it yet worth one's while down yonder?"

"Yes, yes," faintly.

"Ha! at last, eh? How much?"

"I—I don't know."

"Guess, then! Don't dare to trifle with me, Ralph," softly, but threateningly—

"That he still might feel
The velvet scabbard hid a blade of steel."

"You know that your father, no less than your sister and yourself, may be in my power at a word."

"I know—I know."

"What is the lookout?"

"An—An Express package came at shutting-up time. I—I believe it contained ten thousand dollars."

There was the merest suspicion of a covetous gleam in the evil, yet handsome, dark eyes, but nothing more.

"Good!" composedly. "As for yourself, my boy, be perfectly easy."

He nodded, reopened the door, and was swiftly gone—swiftly and silently, for all his great bulk and weight.

Ralph sunk back in his chair, with an inward groan.

But when Rose returned a few minutes later, he had mastered his alarm sufficiently to disguise it, and was apparently still immersed in the newspaper.

She glanced at him approvingly.

"We shall have a nice beefsteak supper, Ralph," said she, setting down the basket and at once busying herself with its contents. "For in spite of one's noontime meal down-town, one gets a good appetite in these chilly evenings."

Ralph looked up interestedly, for, notwithstanding his dissipation, or perhaps because of it, he was always more or less hungry.

"Anybody looked in while I was gone?" she continued, a few neighborly acquaintances having been made in the same house.

"Not a soul."

She soon had the table set in the adjoining little dining-room. Then the steak was speedily broiled to a turn; after which they sat down to their supper, which was appetizing in other ways, and included fragrant tea as a beverage.

Ralph would gladly have suggested a pitcher of beer, but there was an undercurrent of sternness beneath Rose's affable good-humor that made him more afraid of her than usual, and he rested content.

"Rose," said he, after she had chatted agree-

ably for some little time, "why don't you marry Horace Allen, since he's so dead in love with you?"

She paused, the cheerfulness slowly going out of her beautiful face.

"Why should I marry him when I don't love him?" she asked, a slight quivering, which he might well have taken for a danger-signal, betraying itself in her delicately-cut nostrils.

"Oh, that for love!" with a snap of his fingers, while finishing his cup of tea with a grimace.

"But, he isn't half a bad fellow personally, for all his beastly ugliness, and want of true style." And he lazily threw himself back in his chair, his thumbs in the arm-holes of his waistcoat, with quite a grand air.

"Mr. Allen," quietly observed Rose, beginning to clear off the table, "is neither disagreeably homely nor wanting in style, in my opinion."

"Humph! Well, then, again I ask you why don't you let him marry you?"

"And again I ask you why should I?"

"Why? Why, because he's rich already, and will be immensely so when that old hog of an uncle of his passes in his checks."

"Indeed!" She was going and coming between the rooms with the dishes now.

"Why, of course! You'd just be living in clover—something as we used to do down in Richmond."

"And supporting you in idleness at the same time?"

"Of course, I'd come in for what I could, you know."

"Well, suppose you just keep on waiting for me to marry with such a highly virtuous end in view, Ralph Marling."

He grew sullen, lighted a cigarette, and, going into the little parlor just beyond, sat down to their hired upright piano, and began to touch off a few rambling but brilliant notes, for both brother and sister were musically gifted.

Rose continued her work in silence, every now and then glancing half-resentfully, half-pathetically at her worthless brother through the communicating doors.

What had she not done and sacrificed for him? and how miserably was he still repaying her, as he had ever done!

Motherless almost from their infancy, she had ever been the stronger, the better and the truer. They had been brought up in affluence, in the vicinity of Richmond, where their father had been a heavy speculator in tobacco. He was a New Yorker, however, who had migrated to the South soon after the war. Rose had been the apple of his eye. Precociously matured both in body and mind, she had almost finished an accomplished education at fifteen. Then had come the crash of her father's falling fortunes, like a bolt from a clear sky. The horror of it was still but a vague and shuddering recollection even to her vigorous mind. Her father had suddenly and most strangely disappeared. Note after note in heavy amounts had fallen due; there was no money in the concern to meet them, and he was not there to explain. His foster-brother and bookkeeper, Max Marling—"Uncle Max," as the children had always been taught to call him—could only shake his head and show the books, which were found to be in a sadly-muddled condition. The inference was that the speculator had absconded with cash to the amount of over a hundred thousand dollars, with the express purpose of cheating his creditors. This inference was fostered by Max Marling's insinuations.

There were a few, however, with the impression that Max—whose character and reputation had never been of the best—was much more likely the scoundrel in the affair than his whilom employer, whose name, on the contrary, had always stood exceptionally high in the community, and who might therefore well be the victim of some mysterious and diabolical plot, if indeed he might not have been made away with.

Rose Marling shared this opinion with her whole soul. She had ever mistrusted Uncle Max, and now, persistently refusing his advances, she managed, through the influence of kind friends, to secure to herself, in spite of her being a minor, a portion of the proceeds from the auction sale of the household furniture, besides retaining a number of old and valued articles therefrom.

As has been intimated, she was a woman in mind, education and physical maturity, if nothing more than a girl in years. Her brother, always a weakling, was her first and constant thought, as he had been since. With the scanty possessions remaining to her from the wreck, she had at once set out with him to seek her fortune amid the smoke and roar of the battle of life in the great metropolis. Her equipment consisted of a brave heart, a keen intelligence, indomitable energy, some metropolitan experience as derived from several prolonged visits in her father's company, and a fair acquisition of phonography and type-writing, as fortunately acquired for the novelty of the thing during her happier and unclouded hours.

There had followed a year or two of hard, at times seemingly hopeless, struggle. Then success, and finally after the discipline of several temporary and poorly-paying situations, the

securing of her present comparatively lucrative employment with Mr. Hardman.

Her beauty might have materially assisted her to profitable work before this, but she would accept of none save upon her industrial merits; while she knew her limitations in music too well to attempt a career in that, her sole line of art, which could never, she was sensible enough to foresee, land her upon a more than minor success. She was simply a noble young working woman, proud of being such, and resolved to win her way.

And Ralph? Well, he had been the ungrateful drag upon her, as has been suggested, losing situation after situation through his incompetence or dissipation, almost as fast as procured for him by her intercession or energy, though thus far, she thanked God, kept secure from positively degrading or incriminating folly.

For the rest, she could only continue to strive and hope. And that was all—though there was more of the heroic and tragic in Rose Marling's struggles of the past five years than could be even indicated or outlined in the foregoing brief sketch.

Finishing her kitchen duties, and more than pleased to see that the young man manifested no desire to go out alone—which would mean nothing more than a round of visits to the neighboring saloons, she joined him at the piano, and, as he rambled off into certain variations, she raised her voice—a superb contralto in a sweet and simple ballad of whose air they were the prelude.

But he quickly wearied of it, and, rising, began to wander up and down the room, after lighting one of his interminable cigarettes.

"Rose," said he, abruptly, at last, and with a furtive, experimental look at her absorbed face as she sat in his place, with her fingers idling over the keys, "I saw some one on Broadway to-day who put me in mind of an old friend."

"What old friend?" she asked, abstractedly.

The answer caused her to suddenly face him with a paling cheek and angry brows.

"Uncle Max."

CHAPTER IV.

THE BLOW FALLS.

"THAT scoundrel!" exclaimed Rose, indignantly.

Ralph cowered a little, but quickly bristled up again.

"Oh, you needn't be unnecessarily furious or alarmed," he said, sullenly. "I doubt not it was only a chance resemblance; in fact, it must have been, as a matter of course."

"I should hope so. If I thought it possible that that villain was really in New York—Well, God forbid that he should be, that is all."

"Oh, pshaw, Rose!" and Ralph straddled a chair, with his arms resting on its back, while facing her and puffing at his cigarette; "Uncle Max wasn't more than half bad, after all; and I can well remember how jolly good-natured he was to us when we were kids."

"He's a villain! Our father's downfall enriched him. You know that as well as I do, Ralph Marling! It was the common belief soon after we left Richmond. Even our father's death may be at his door, for all we know."

"Oh, come, come!"

"It is true! Such was the common belief, as expressed in the first letters I had from Mrs. Spotswood. And since then we have heard that the man had fled from Richmond, after engaging in a series of outrageous swindles, besides being identified as associated, with a great gang of crooks extending its operations all over the State and elsewhere."

"One mustn't believe everything one hears, my dear Rose."

"Enough of that nonsense, Ralph. And yet, you can speak charitably of such a scoundrel! Thank Heaven, he is no blood relative of ours, at all events! It is humiliating enough to have known him nominally as such, in all conscience."

Ralph relapsed into a moody silence, in which cigarette after cigarette was steadily consumed.

At last he started up wildly, striking the back of the chair with his fist. He was rather prone to these ebullitions, doubtless deeming them as manifestations of impulsive genius.

"If you can't see your true interest in marrying a good man for his money," he cried, "by Jupiter! I can see mine in making all I can, and—"

She had interrupted him with an amused laugh, looking up from the book she had taken to reading.

"And what, then, my dear brother?" she bantered. "Come now, Sir Croesus, what sudden financial scheme are you evolving? And what?"

"Oh, you may laugh! but," recklessly, "what would you say if I were to tell you that I had a thousand dollars to begin with in my pocket at this moment?"

Rose, all unsuspecting, burst into unrestrained laughter.

"Ha! ha! What would I say?" she cried. "Why, my dear Ralph, I would merely say that you were growing funnier and funnier every day of your life!"

He also laughed, and so loudly that she did not perceive it was forced.

"Well, well, sissy," he said, "I can at least go to bed and dream of the wealth to come."

He accordingly kissed her good-night—a little more warmly than was his wont, as she afterward thought, though there were many odd things in his speech and manner that evening that only occurred to her later on—and forthwith retired to his room.

Once ensconced there, the hopeful youth betrayed the secret of his unusual contentedness with the domestic circle for that one evening.

He calmly produced a small flask of liquor, and imbibed half of it with a sly smack of the lips, and a satisfied glance at the closed door, on the other side of which was the trusting sister whom he imagined himself to be so cleverly outwitting.

After that he assured himself of the security of a certain package in an inner breast-pocket of his waistcoat, glanced at his watch to perceive that it was still in the shank of the evening, as he called it, wound it up, undressed, and, turning out the gas, was soon in bed and fast asleep.

Rose looked in on him an hour later, gave a sigh of relief at perceiving that he was unquestionably sound asleep, and, imprinting a light kiss upon his forehead, sought her own room.

Then, having wound up and set her little alarm-clock for five of the following morning, as was her custom, she went to bed herself.

Rising at its summons, she got the breakfast ready, and then knocked at her brother's door, with the necessary announcement.

There being no answer, nor any sound in response, she entered the room.

It was empty. Ralph had got the start of her and was gone!

Nothing particularly alarming, though something angrier, in this at first, since he had often played the same trick upon her in the sly pursuit of an early morning cocktail.

She merely felt troubled, and sat down to breakfast alone, quite sure that he would come dawdling in before it was time to go down to the store, as he often had done before.

But this time he did not. She cleared off the table, and washed up the dishes, every moment growing more anxious.

Then a more careful examination of his room showed that his hand-valise was missing, together with several shirts and other articles from his drawer.

What could it mean?

Sick at heart, she waited till the last moment, and then, locking up the flat, went down-town, still with a lingering hope to find that he had preceded her at the store.

Vain hope! No Mr. Ralph there, but Mr. Hardman himself, notwithstanding the earliness of the hour, together with Horace Allen, a brawny policeman, and a couple of safe-lock experts.

All were in the outer office, and the two latter were tinkering with cold chisels and hammers about the doors of the safe, which had the appearance of being blackened and warped, while the neighboring office furniture was more or less wrecked, and the upper sash of one of the windows blown out and shattered.

Rose looked first at Mr. Hardman and then at Horace in mute and stupefied inquiry.

"A robbery?" she queried of the latter, as he stepped a little to one side with her.

"Only an attempt at one," he answered, with a forced smile. "It seems that the rascals defeated themselves by an overcharge of their blasting-powder. At all events, the noise of the explosion attracted the attention of the police at about midnight, though only in time to frighten off, without arresting, the operators."

He pointed to an inner-office window, communicating with a small alley in the rear, by which both the entrance and the escape had doubtless been effected.

By this time the experts had restored the lock to working order, and the doors of the safe were laboriously opened.

"The Express package, Horace!" exclaimed Mr. Hardman; "that is the most important."

"Here it is, uncle!"

And, stepping into the great safe, Horace returned with the package in his hand.

"But be sure," urged the merchant, nervously, while some of the others looked up in surprise, it was so evident that the burglarious attempt had been a failure. "Count it out."

"That is easy enough," replied the young man, good-humoredly, "since there are just ten separate packets of a thousand dollars each."

He reopened the great envelope, and began to count, after which he looked up in alarm. There were only nine bundles of greenbacks! He counted them over, but with no better result.

"One bunch of a thousand dollars is missing!" he faltered, the drops standing out on his forehead.

"Then it was missing before the safe was closed," interposed one of the experts, bluntly. "The cracksmen never bursted them doors open, and I'll swear to it!"

Mr. Hardman had grown very pale and stern. "Where is your brother this morning, Miss Marling?" he suddenly asked, turning his glance upon the young woman.

"I don't know," replied poor Rose, quite helplessly and overcome.

And she sunk, trembling into a chair, a flood of recollections as to Ralph's words and manner rushing upon her like a black mist.

CHAPTER V.

DOUBT AND DESPAIR.

HORACE ALLEN was at the young girl's side in an instant.

"Don't worry unnecessarily," he whispered, reassuringly. "Nothing is certain as yet."

But Rose, though she managed speedily to regain something of her composure with her accustomed bravery, knew too well in her own heart what she had to fear for her miserable brother.

His unwonted ghastliness of the night before, his fitful, preoccupied words, his vaunt as to the thousand dollars as possibly in his possession, which she had taken for his boyish vamping—all now returned to her with crushing force.

Besides, as she remembered the original counting of the money, she saw that it would have been possible for Ralph, after Mr. Hardman had been called temporarily to the front of the store, to crawl in under the bookkeeper's rail and possess himself of one of the packets as they lay at the edge of the high desk, while Horace and she were absorbed and busy with making up the remainder—just possible, and no more, though she would scarcely have credited her brother with the boldness of the attempt.

Mr. Hardman, however, was very kind and considerate to herself.

When the policeman and the others were gone, and she had frankly related to him and Horace the particulars of her brother's disappearance, he merely said:

"We'll give him till noon to show up and make an explanation. Let us now get to work, Miss Marling, if you feel equal to it."

The morning mail was already on hand. Click, click, clickety-click! She was again at her place, the faithful operator of the typewriting machine, though with a breaking heart and a reeling brain.

Her own twin brother Ralph hopelessly disgraced, a scoundrel and a thief at last, after all her struggles, her prayers, her dauntless guardianship, her wrestlings with the invisible devil that had perhaps all the time had his malicious fingers on the keys of the boy's weakness and vanity, as one might secretly test the stops and cadences of a poor pipe, or an imperfect flute!

Shortly before noon Mr. Hardman hurried through with some final dictations, and then, glancing at the clock, put on his hat and overcoat, and moodily quitted the office.

She more than suspected his intention, and was fluttering over some last pages in a brave but vain effort to maintain her composure, when Horace Allen also prepared to go out, and then came in to her as she still sat at the machine.

"Keep on trying to cheer up," he said, gently. "I'll do all that I can."

"What do you mean, Mr. Allen?" And she looked up with a wan little flickering smile that smote upon his heart.

"You can guess whither my uncle has gone?"

"Yes; doubtless to find a detective."

He nodded commiseratingly.

"Likely enough," he continued. "In justice to himself, my uncle couldn't do less, as a matter of course. But do you go to your dinner as usual, with a hopeful heart, Miss Marling. I, too, am going away, you perceive."

"For what?"

He hesitated.

"You shan't be or feel disgraced, if I can help it," he said, turning red.

"Thank you, with all my heart! But where are you going?"

"To forestall my uncle, if need be, and if possible."

"How?" not understanding.

"To find Ralph, and give him warning, if I can. I am fairly well-to-do, and shall make up the deficiency myself, if it comes to that. At all events, he shan't be arrested."

For an instant the rich blood rushed into the suffering pallor of her sweet face, and her eyes swam.

Was this the homely man who so loved her, and even, as she had persistently declared to him, without hope?

For that instant his ugliness vanished, and he stood there transfigured—handsome and devoted as a pure-minded knight of old.

"Oh, you are too good, too good!" was all she could say; and with a grateful look, he hurried away.

They had not been wrong as to Mr. Hardman's intentions.

Half an hour after quitting his office he was at Police Headquarters.

Having inquired for Inspector Byrnes, the chief of the detective police, he was shown

into a large, barely furnished outer office and told to wait.

He found himself there entirely alone at first, and was curiously eying his surroundings when a pleasant voice said:

"What can I do for you, sir?"

He turned to find himself confronted by a calm, gentlemanly officer, with a healthfully rosy face and an enormous mustache, who seemed to have silently risen out of the floor, so noiseless had been his entrance, probably by one of a number of small doors at one side of the room.

"I want to see Inspector Byrnes, sir," replied Mr. Hardman, when he had recovered from his surprise.

"You do see him," with a smile.

"Oh! Well, inspector, I have been robbed, and want you to get back my money for me and punish the thief. That is about the first size of it."

Inspector Byrnes signed him to a seat at the side of a low desk, took his own seat behind it, and then requested him to tell his story, with no more details than would bear directly on the case.

Mr. Hardman did so.

"I shall put a detective on the case at once," promptly observed the inspector, when the story was told.

"One of your detectives once found my watch for me after it had been stolen, besides arresting and convicting the pickpocket very neatly," suggested Mr. Hardman. "If all the same to you, I'd like to have the same man undertake this case."

"What is his name?"

"Alden or Malden, I think; though I am a poor hand at remembering names!"

"Walden, more likely—Wirt Walden."

"That is the name."

The inspector touched a bell, and a policeman in waiting appeared.

"See if Walden is in the general room," ordered the inspector. "If so, send him to me."

The officer bowed, and disappeared.

"Walden is a good man," observed the inspector, while arranging the writing materials on his desk. "If disengaged, as I think he is, he shall attend to this matter, Mr. Hardman."

A moment later a young man appeared by the same door the messenger had gone out by, and smiled his recognition of the merchant.

Before the inspector could speak, a tall, graceful, and handsome blondeman, whose uniform, bearing, as did the detective chief's, the insignia of a police inspector, fitted his slender but admirably athletic figure like a glove, came into the room by the main entrance, and, seeing that his brother officer was occupied, stood waiting negligently, with just a trace of interest in his face for what might be passing.

Mr. Hardman recognized in the new-comer an official with whose personality but few New York City men, of whatever vocation or degree, are wholly unacquainted—the redoubtable Inspector (formerly captain) Alexander Williams, of the Metropolitan Police.

"Ah, captain," said Inspector Byrnes, smiling, "I shall be ready for you in short order. In the mean time, here is something of some interest."

He therefore recounted, for the detective's particular benefit, the entire story of the missing money and the burglarious attempt in such few, forcible and well-chosen words that the merchant was fairly astonished.

It was a perfect picture, suggestive of an instantaneous photograph, of the entire complication which had cost him so much thought and speech to present in the first instance.

"The case is in your hands, Walden," observed the chief, brusquely. "What is your first impression?"

Before replying, the detective, Wirt Walden, turned to Mr. Hardman.

"Describe, sir, if you please," said he, "the typewriter's brother, this young man, Ralph Marling."

The merchant lost no time in doing so, not forgetting the young man's habits, nor what he knew of his history, though mindful of an associative good word or two on Rose Marling's own account.

Walden made an impatient gesture at the long-windedness of the description requested, and then turned to his chief.

"The boy is the thief," said he, abruptly, "though, of course, I shall make an investigation. So much for the missing package of banknotes. As for the subsequent attempt at burglary, I haven't an idea as yet."

"I have," quietly interposed Inspector Williams. "Major Ludgate is at the bottom of it—I think."

"Oho!" And both the detective chief and his subordinate looked up interestedly.

"Who is Major Ludgate?" asked the merchant, a little bewilderedly.

"A comparatively new power among our criminal population," Inspector Williams vouchsafed to reply, somewhat indifferently. "He is the Corpulent Mystery otherwise Max Marling, an all-round but exceedingly clever scoundrel from down in Virginia. The boy, Ralph, has been seen in his company."

CHAPTER VI.

THE FRIEND IN NEED.

"MARLING—Max Marling!" repeated Mr. Hardman, looking first at one inspector and then at another. "Heavens! can this criminal be any relation to Ralph, and consequently to my typewriter, Rose Marling?"

"Don't know—possibly," replied Inspector Williams, somewhat gruffly—he wasn't on hand for long explanations that day—while the detective chief likewise manifested his impatience. "Detective Walden will attend to your case, Mr. Hardman."

"But, look here! Answer me just one more thing," stammered the merchant, rising to take himself off in accordance with the hint, but speaking beseechingly.

"Be quick, then, if you please," said the inspector of the detective bureau.

"Could Ralph have also been associated with the subsequent attempt to break into my safe?"

"Not he!" contemptuously. "Sneak-thieves often develop out of their caliber of viciousness, bold cracksmen never. However," exchanging a look with Williams, "he might have been capable of affording a hint. That will do, Mr. Hardman," peremptorily. "Very busy just now. Walden will return to your office with you, and make the investigation."

The merchant accordingly lost no more time in taking himself off with the detective.

Once out of the building, however, the former consulted his watch, at the same time softly laying his hand upon his rather capacious stomach with a significance or pathos that was unmistakable.

"Hold on, my young friend!" he remarked. "I thought I was feeling sort of queer. Half-past one o'clock, and I haven't had any lunch yet!"

"I haven't had any time to think of mine," replied the detective, smiling.

"Lunch with me, then, somewhere over here on Broadway."

"With all my heart, Mr. Hardman."

"But have we time, do you think?"

"We'll take it. That affair down at your office will keep."

"But that young rascal with my thousand dollars! might he not escape in the interim?"

"He escape! Bless you! I shall lay my hand on him when I want him."

And they went off to lunch.

But, shrewd detective as Wirt Walden was, he could not know of certain cross-purposes that were already at work against the merchant and himself, or he might not have spoken so disdainfully and confidently.

In the mean time, Horace Allen, with the sole thought of saving Rose Marling further and more public humiliation, and alike forgetful of his accustomed noonday meal, had likewise winged his way northward through the great city, but much further northward than Police Headquarters.

The fact was that he, no less than Rose, lived in Harlem, though in a much more aristocratic portion thereof than she, and he was, moreover, much better acquainted with surreptitious haunts than she or any one else could have any idea of.

After exploring several of these, he at last alighted upon the young man in the back room of a mean waterside groggery not far from the Harlem Bridge, where he was cowering in a half-drunken, half-dazed condition, a glass of spirits at his elbow, his hurriedly-packed valise between his feet.

"Here, Ralph, I want you!" exclaimed Allen, shaking him roughly by the shoulder, after first carefully closing the door—for the room chanced to be without other occupants. "Doesn't your conscience tell you what I want you for?"

Conscience! but then Horace, under the circumstances of his profound and unselfish love for Rose, could be excused for not having divined that this was a prompting to which the scapegrace was as much a stranger as if he had been born without such a thing.

Ralph looked up in a scared way, but quickly rallied, for his cunning was so great as to positively stand him in stead of moral courage, of which he was wholly devoid.

"Oh, yes, Mr. Allen, I understand," he managed to reply, peevishly. "I'm drunk again, and my situation is irretrievably gone up, as a matter of course."

Allen was more or less staggered by the youth's duplicity.

"A thousand dollars was stolen from that Express package your sister was helping me to examine last evening," he exclaimed, abruptly, "and you are suspected almost to a certainty of being the thief."

Ralph gasped for breath and again turned ghastly, but once more rallied his cunning to his aid.

"Who, I?" he stammered. "Good God! you can't be in earnest?"

"Didn't you take it—creep out from the inner office and take one of the packets while Rose and I were counting up?"

"As Heaven is my judge, no!" cried Ralph, who could lie like a Greek on any occasion. "Great Scott! you fairly paralyze me!"

"Then why this stealthy and cowardly desertion of your sister?" demanded Horace, sternly. "Why that packed portmanteau at your feet? And this disguise? Your mustache is gone, and you are wearing a slouched, instead of a stiff hat. Even I hardly knew you at first."

"Well, it is just this," replied the young rascal, after a well-counterfeited hesitation. "I knew Mr. Hardman must be contemplating my dismissal, and I got desperate. And I just resolved at last to rid Rose of any further trouble on my worthless part. As for the disguise, it was my whim; and then I had a few dollars I had made out of billiard and pool-playing not long ago, that she could know nothing about. That's the whole story."

Horace knew him to be a splendid billiard and pool player, so that this part of his explanation was not so improbable as it might otherwise seem.

"And you had no thought of the anxiety and distress you were causing your sister?"

"Perhaps so; but that be blamed!" nonchalantly. "It had to come sooner or later, and she'll be all the better off when she gets over it."

There was no denying this, in Horace's opinion, though he looked down on the heartless young wretch darkly and doubtfully.

He was morally sure that the fellow was lying with regard to the missing money, notwithstanding his apparent earnestness. But, what was he to do? Call an officer, have him arrested, searched, and the money produced forthwith? No; not if he had to make the amount good to his uncle out of his own pocket! Such a course would be to cap the climax to Rose's humiliation, whereas the matter might now be kept out of the newspapers, with the single exception of the attempted burglary. In a moment he had determined to adhere to his original intention.

"Ralph, this won't do," he said, decidedly. "My uncle thoroughly believes you guilty, and has already gone for a detective."

Ralph looked up in an agony of trepidation, even his cunning deserting him for the moment.

"Good heavens!" he faltered; "what will become of me?"

"You must be on your way to Canada in less than an hour, or you are lost."

"By Jupiter, I'll do it!" and springing to his feet with a half-helpless energy, he snatched up his valise.

"Go on right over the bridge," continued Allen. "You can catch a north-bound train at the Mott Haven station at almost any hour. Then when you reach the extremity of the Harlem Railroad, you can have little difficulty in making a connection for the border. When you reach Montreal, you can drop me a telegram to that effect. You sha'n't be pursued thither if I can help it. Will you do this?"

"Will I? Allen, you are a good fellow; give me your hand!"

Horace evaded the handclasp, and then, accompanying the fugitive out of the groggery, watched him hurry northward over the bridge with a trembling haste that was a sufficient assurance of the sincerity of his alarm.

Then Horace posted back down-town. He had used such dispatch that he re-entered the office only a few minutes after Mr. Hardman and the detective, delayed by their lunch, had reached there.

"Glad you are back, Horace," said the merchant. "However, Mr. Detective Walden here has already examined the premises, taken in the situation, and—is convinced," with a pitying glance at Rose, whose pale face and exquisitely shaped head could be seen bending over her machine in the inner office, with some shorthand notes before her as she nimbly manipulated the keys. "I am going out with Walden now," lowering his voice, "to swear out the necessary warrant. You understand?"

Horace nodded, and resumed his place at his desk, from which, together with the rest of the furniture, all traces of the burglarious explosion had been removed.

"By the way," added Mr. Hardman, pausing on his way out, "a lot of newspaper reporters have been here during my absence. Should they call again, as of course they will, you can attend to them."

"In my own way, uncle?" asked the young man, looking up quickly, with a side glance through the door at Rose. "Say that I can, please!"

Mr. Hardman comprehended.

"Yes," he assented, after a half-angry pause.

"Do as you please in that matter."

"And this gentleman," Horace partly turned to the detective, "will he also be so obliging as to keep this one matter away from the reporters, at least until—until after the young man's arrest?"

"Make yourself easy, sir," replied Wirt Walden, answering for himself—he was about thirty, gray-eyed, featured like a bird of prey, and with a tall, perfectly-proportioned figure that suggested the incarnation of muscular vigor, activity and alertness. "That can readily be arranged, and I shall see to it."

As soon as Mr. Hardman and the detective had gone, Horace stepped to Rose's side.

"You needn't even look up, Miss Marling," he said, gently. "But there is this poor consolation for you: I have seen him, and he is gone—gone Canadaward, and is doubtless even by this time beyond their reach."

She did look up, to give him one grateful, swimming glance, but he had already stepped back to his desk.

There was, fortunately, but little office business that afternoon, it being a Saturday; but the newspaper reporters none the less put in an appearance in short order.

Horace received them with affability, and gave them a detailed account of the attempted safe-breaking, so far as it was known.

"But, look here, Mr. Bookkeeper," said one of them, who seemed the tacitly accredited spokesman of his companions, "wasn't there something else?"

"Nothing," blandly.

"Not about a missing money package, supposed to have been stolen from the Express bundle before the safe was closed for the night?"

"Oh, that!" with a laugh. "All a momentary mistake, and the money subsequently found. Good-afternoon, gentlemen!"

And the gentlemen of the press took themselves off, not a little disappointed.

It was a very white lie, everything considered, and Rose, who had overheard the interview, blessed Horace Allen in her suffering heart for it.

CHAPTER VII.

HORACE AS A BODY-GUARD.

MR. HARDMAN returned to the office a little later on.

"It is all right," he said to his nephew, in a low voice. "The detective is sure that the young villain has not left the city, and that he will have him under arrest before morning. But, for Miss Marling's sake, I shall perhaps refuse to prosecute, in case the missing money is recovered."

"That is real good of you, Uncle Jonas," replied Horace.

"Suppose you come out in front with me. There is a thing or two, in connection with these Marlins, that perhaps you ought to know."

The young man complied, and then Mr. Hardman acquainted him with the hints he had received at Headquarters with respect to the adventurer, the Corpulent Mystery, otherwise Max Marling, alias Major Ludgate.

"I thought you ought to know about this, my boy," said the old merchant, quite earnestly, in conclusion. "For, fine girl as Miss Marling unquestionably is, you could never think of marrying into such a family, as a matter of course. Why, apart from the rascality of this little wretch, the girl's brother, think of this desperate adventurer—a man already in the police black-books, it seems, though a comparative new-comer in the city—bearing the same surname, and therefore more than likely a blood-relation! Just think of it!"

"Thank you, uncle," the young man coldly replied. "But I do not think there is any danger of my ever marrying into Miss Marling's family. Unfortunately for me, the young lady does not return my affection, and I doubt if she ever will."

"Humph! Excellent, excellent! That is, I mean—No offense intended, Horace. By the way, I sha'n't return to the office, and you may tell Miss Marling she can knock off as soon as she typewrites those last long letters I dictated. Thank the Lord, there are no more thousands in the safe to tempt another burglarious attack. Of course, I shall see you at dinner?"

"Wait, uncle; no; I shall more than likely have an engagement to dine out this evening."

"Eh, eh? Well, as you please, my boy," and Mr. Hardman took his departure.

Horace returned to the office, and reported his uncle's message to Rose.

Then, a little later on, when she was closing up her machine, and after he had also put up his books and shut the safe, he had the satisfaction of laying all the evening papers before her, each with the account of the previous night's sensation marked and turned uppermost.

She glanced over them, one after another, in silence. Each and all referred exclusively to the safe-breaking attempt, without the slightest allusion to scapegrace Ralph or the missing money.

"This is too good of you, Mr. Allen!" she said, in her low, earnest voice, and without looking up; "much better than I deserve, I am afraid."

He made an impatient, dismissive gesture.

"Rose!" he exclaimed, irrelevantly—"for I am going to call you Rose in the future, just as if—as if I were your elder brother, you know."

And then he paused expectantly, and perhaps a little timidly.

"Very good, Mr. Allen," she assented, in a yet lower voice. "I shall make no objection to that."

"Thank you, Rose, thank you! And now I

am going to venture upon a yet bolder liberty with you."

"What is it—Horace?"

Even this concession, though uttered with absolute dejectedness, made him flush pleasantly.

"I am going to take the liberty of seeing you home, Rose," he went on, resolutely. "I must be sure that you are properly protected there, and I have, moreover, much to say that you ought to know—which perhaps it is indispensable for your safety that you should know."

She looked up to him, with both curiosity and submission in her sorrowful eyes.

"Very well," she replied.

She even permitted him to take her to a restaurant on upper Broadway for supper on his plea that she would feel too much out of sorts to cook a meal after reaching home.

Rose was very silent and abstracted while the supper was being discussed, and he made little attempt at a conversation for which he saw she was so little inclined.

On the Elevated cars, however, Harlemward bound, he managed to convey in whispers, that were silently received, the particulars of his discovery of and parting interview with her brother.

"I only regret this much," she said, upon their quitting the cars—"your uncle's anger when he comes to find how you have outwitted him and his detective."

"Pray don't disturb yourself as to that," replied the young man, composedly. "I shall myself tell him what I have done in good season, and—take the consequences."

The evening was raw and chilly.

In a crowded section of Third avenue, not far from Rose's home, a very bulky man, muffled to the eyes, and with a singularly active, springing gait where one would have looked for slow and laborious movement, stared Rose and her companion hard in the face in passing, and then passed on with the tramping crowd.

"What an insolent fellow!" commented Horace, half to himself. "I wonder now if—"

Rose had shrunk to one side, and was standing a little apart from the rush, pale and trembling.

"In Heaven's name, what is the matter?" he demanded, in a low, reassuring voice. "Did you recognize the man as some one you know?"

"Yes, yes!"

"Who, let me ask?"

"Uncle Max! Come, come! let us not delay. And pray be sure to see that he does not track me."

"Depend on me for that!"

And he hurried away with her, keeping his eyes sharply about him.

"I am sure he has not followed us," he said, as she ushered him into the flat-house where she lived—one of the better of the cheap sort, in a decent but poor neighborhood, "though, of course, there is no telling if he may not have done so before this."

"But I can still hope to the contrary—still hope, hope!"

As they disappeared, a shapely, muscular-looking man took up a watchful station on the opposite side of the street.

It was Wirt Walden, the detective, who had not as yet laid his arresting hand on Ralph Marling's shoulder with the readiness he had anticipated.

CHAPTER VIII.

AN IMPORTANT INTERVIEW.

HAVING introduced Horace Allen into her little home, Rose soon had the place pleasantly warmed and lighted.

The first privileged glimpse into the home-life, however humble, of the woman of one's heart, must ever be one of the profoundest curiosity and interest, and Horace had never before intruded upon Rose Marling's domesticity.

Though used to many elegancies and luxuries in his own home—he lived with his bachelor uncle, who was not a little of an epicure, in rather grand style, an elderly distant relative keeping house for them, and with no end of servants—he looked with genuine admiration upon the solid old furniture surrounding him in the little parlor, and noted with satisfaction that even the steel engravings on the walls were artistically valuable and well chosen.

"All is from my old home in Richmond," said Rose, observing his looks, "with the single exception of the piano. That is hired."

"Of course, you play, then?" he queried.

"Quite well, though pray do not ask me to do so this evening, Horace. Somehow—"

"I understand, Rose. Besides, I am here to talk with you on grave concerns."

They were sitting in the little parlor, and she had insisted on his occupying an old-fashioned easy chair, so that he was quite comfortable.

"You can say to me what you please—on such concerns—my friend," replied the young woman, in her composed, serious way—for she had quickly recovered from her perturbation of a short time before. "You have earned the right to do so."

"Thank you, Rose. And if I should ask you any seemingly painful questions, pray remember that it will be solely in your interest."

"No need for you to say that. You would naturally first know, perhaps, something about that man who so startled me on the street?"

"Yes; though I chance to know a little something of him already. That is, if his name is Max Marling."

"It is his name."

"He—he is then a relative of yours, Rose?"

"Thank God, no! None whatever!"

"I rejoice to hear that. And yet he bears your name, and you spoke of him as 'Uncle Max'?"

"From old habit. He is or was my father's adopted brother, and," in a low, intense voice, "perhaps as unscrupulous, heartless a scoundrel as ever lived!"

Then, after a long pause, and unsolicited, she gave him the particulars of her history.

"A strange, strange story!" was the young man's comment; "and this man has doubtless been the evil genius of your fortunes."

"I think there cannot be a doubt of it. And I fear him now more than ever."

"Then you also feared him in your childhood?"

"Yes; vaguely so, even when he was apparently jovial and kind to poor Ralph and me, though Ralph was always his favorite."

"And why should you continue to fear him?"

"I scarcely know; but I have an impression that he is a sort of mesmerizer, with an ability to sway certain susceptible natures according to his will and against their own."

"Oho! Rose, what do you think became of your father?"

"I can't imagine. It is all a horrible mystery."

"But you must have some instinctive impression in the matter?"

"Yes," slowly, "I have."

"That he is alive or dead?"

"Alive—yes; I can't get over the impression that he is somewhere alive."

"But where and how?"

"Alas! how can I say?" with a shudder.

"Perhaps a nameless maniac in some distant asylum; perhaps a dazed wanderer in some far foreign land, forgetful of friends, country, even of his own name. I have read of some such hapless fate theoretically applied to men who have unaccountably disappeared—as unaccountably as if the earth had unexpectedly opened and swallowed them."

"So have I," observed Horace, thoughtfully.

"Rose, was your father's such a temperament as this man, Max Marling, might have thus impressed with this strange power of animal magnetism, or mesmerism, which you think it probable he may possess?"

"Oh, I don't know; perhaps so. I have often thought it over, but with no satisfactory result. How should I know?"

"But what sort of a temperament was your father's?"

"What they would call of the nervous-sanguine order, I suppose," Rose replied, after a troubled and meditative pause. "Though doubtless an excellent business man in his way—he was, perhaps, too sanguine and visionary, though, and too ready to depend upon others (and notably upon 'Uncle Max,' his bookkeeper and confidential man) for managing the details of his speculative ventures—papa, as I can now analyze my recollections of him, was by turns a dreamer and an enthusiast. His was one of the most sensitive masculine natures I ever knew, and he was also the soul of honor and integrity. He might, I think, have been a poet, a painter, or a noted musician, under different environments."

"Ah, we are progressing! And now, as to this man, this spurious uncle?"

"Oh, don't ask me anything more about him!" with another half-suppressed shudder.

"But why, Rose?—for this is indispensable to what I am driving at."

"Ah, my fear of him has continued to grow with the years!"

"Still, try to tell me what he is like, my friend, I beg of you!"

"In mind, as in body, an enigma. Jovial and unscrupulous; with a strange sort of thrilling power under his laughter and his smiles; and at the same time with a suggestion of remorselessness—deadliness!"

"Why, this mystery begins to seem plain to me. You say it is now generally believed that this man secretly enriched himself with the funds your father was at first supposed to have absconded with?"

"Yes; so I have been informed by the sole remaining friend of our family there who occasionally corresponds with me."

"Please let me have the name; you see, I may have occasion to run down there one of these days."

"Mrs. J. H. Spotswood. She is a fine woman, the widow of Judge Spotswood, who was an intimate friend of my father's."

"Thank you, Rose. Now as to this man's antecedents?"

"Nothing is certainly known of them."

"An adoptive brother of your father's, you say?"

"Yes; and I have heard that my grandfather adopted him much against my grandmother's

wishes and instinctive apprehensions. I have also heard that 'Uncle Max' was of Gypsy stock, but nothing of the particulars of his adoption. My father was always more or less reticent on the subject, probably out of regard to what he considered his foster-brother's feelings. They are or were of nearly the same age, which would make this man forty-eight or fifty to-day. That is really all I know."

"It is enough. Rose, this mystery of your past shall be investigated to the full. I shall make it my special task; and doubtless this detective, Wirt Walden, will be willing enough to help me when he finds that the fugitive of the hour, your misera—your ill-starred brother, is beyond his clutch."

He spoke so hopefully and energetically that Rose looked up out of her composed dejection with the nearest approach to a smile that she had worn for many an hour.

"And now I have come," continued Horace, "to a topic that chiefly prompted me to force this visit of mine upon you."

"Do not speak that way," protested Rose, gently. "What is it you would say?"

"I have told you that I was satisfied Ralph was carrying away that stolen money with him, notwithstanding the earnestness with which he swore to the contrary."

"Yes," in a low voice, and with a pained blush, "and it would be unfair of me to be otherwise than candid with you, at whatever cost to my feelings. I believe it, too."

"The youth has been holding communication with the man Max regularly," announced Horace, abruptly. "You could not have suspected it?"

"Suspected it?" She had turned pale. "Good heavens, no! But are you quite sure?"

"Quite, from what my uncle learned at Headquarters, from the admissions of such men as Inspector Byrnes and Captain Williams. The man Max Marling, otherwise Major Ludgate, otherwise the Corpulent Mystery, is already on their black lists, and Ralph has been 'spotted,' as they say, more than once in his company."

Rose seemed to be almost overcome by what she heard, though she was making a brave effort to rally her self-control.

"Now I come to my main question," continued Horace, gently, but firmly. "It is this: Might not Ralph have carried off something more than the stolen money, and perhaps at this master-scoundrel's instigation or command? Have, or had, you, for instance, anything particularly valuable in your possession which this man might have coveted?"

Rose sprung to her feet.

"Heavens, yes!" she faltered. "How could I have forgotten it! My father's last confidence—the secret papers—the sealed manuscript!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE BODY-GUARD ON THE ALERT.

So exclaiming, Rose Marling pounced upon a trunk in one corner of the little parlor, where, neatly cushioned and covered with gayly-colored chintz, it did duty both as a seat and an ornament.

Denuding it of its covering, she tore it open with trembling hands, the young man meanwhile watching her with mingled wonder and curiosity.

She plunged her hands into the interior, hurriedly turning over and tossing out article after article, and there was the click, probably of a secret spring communicating with a false bottom.

"It is here!" she cried, with an air of unspeakable relief. "See!" and she held up a large, strong and thick-packed envelope.

Placing it in the young man's hands, as she sunk back into her seat with a sigh, he saw that it was inscribed simply with her name, in a large, full hand, while written smaller in the upper left hand corner were the words:

"To be opened only after my death. H. M."

"You honor me with much confidence," observed Allen, modestly, "by placing this in my hands."

"You have earned my fullest confidence, my friend," she replied, ingenuously.

"Thank you. May I then know about this package?"

"Just as much as I know myself."

"How?"

"It was placed in my hands by my father, a week before his death, coupled with the exaction of a solemn promise that I would under no circumstances part with it, or break its seal, unless absolutely assured of his death."

"Indeed!"

"Yes; it was of the nature of an oath."

"But this is very extraordinary, Rose."

"I am well aware of that."

"But it may contain information that would lead to the discovery of his whereabouts, on the assumption that he is still alive."

"It most probably does."

"Perhaps together with other and no less valuable information—for instance such as might clear his name beyond question, and bring righteous retribution on the head of this

villainous foster-brother, who doubtless enriched himself by his ruin, if he did not actually contrive it!"

"It is more than likely."

Horace felt more and more impressed with holding such a package, perhaps so fateful and important, in his hands.

"But, look here, Rose," said he, slowly, "even everything considered, if I were in your place, I should feel sorely tempted—"

She interrupted him with a swift gesture.

"Don't complete what you were about to say, my friend," she gravely enjoined. "Yes; were you in my place, you might feel tempted to examine the contents of that mysterious package, but you would not yield to the temptation. Honor, respect for your oath, veneration for the absent and dear at whose hands you received it, would alike preserve you from yielding to it."

"You are right!" he handed her back the package. "But you will perhaps permit a few questions?"

"All you choose to ask, my friend."

"Ralph knew of this being in your possession?"

"He did."

"And of your hiding-place for it at the bottom of that trunk?"

"Yes."

"And Max Marling, does he know of your possessing this package of documents?"

"Unfortunately, I am afraid he does. My father was still trustful of him thereafter, and might well have confided in him something of the nature of the secret reposed in me. Though, of course, this is merely my conjecture."

"Then, Rose, it were far safer for you to confide this package into my care for deposit in my uncle's fire and burglar proof safe; or, perhaps still better, in our compartment in the Safe Deposit Company's vaults."

"You forget one of the conditions of my promise to my father—that it was not to pass out of my personal custody."

"True," half-despairingly. "This is very unfortunate—very."

"Why?"

"I am compelled to speak to you plainly, Rose; even if I should thereby still further wound your sensibilities."

"Speak, Mr. Allen," anxiously. "Do not spare me in such a case."

"In addition to your brother's theft, he very probably gave the subsequent hint to Max Marling which instigated the unsuccessful attempt to blow up my uncle's safe last night."

"Heavens! can you believe this of Ralph?"

"I can and do," solemnly, "taking my cue from a similar belief on the part of such experts as Captain Williams and Inspector Byrnes, as reported to me by my uncle."

Rose buried her face in her hands, and her bosom shook convulsively. But it was only for an instant. When she looked up again, she was once more composed, though very pale.

"So you see," continued Horace, slightly averting his eyes lest her pitiful distress might unman him, "what danger you necessarily subject yourself to, Miss Marling—more particularly that you are now living in these apartments alone—should that powerful scoundrel suddenly determine to possess himself of your secret."

"I do see that, but there is simply no help for it," replied the young girl, calmly. "I shall take my chances."

She returned the package to the bottom of the trunk, restored its other contents to order, and then covered it neatly as before.

He arose, and held out his hand.

"One or two things more," he said, as she placed her hand in his. "Are the inner fastenings of your doors in perfect order?"

"Yes, or fairly so."

"And—pardon me—have you any weapon at hand in case of need?"

"No pardon needed," smiling, and pointing to her bedroom door. "I never go to sleep without a revolver by my pillow, and I know how to use it. I learned that in Virginia."

"It is well. Good-night, Rose, and may the good and just God have you in his keeping!"

She bent her head gently, without answering in words.

As he passed down the first, or upper flight of stairs, he heard some solemn and rich notes being struck out of her piano with a strong but exquisite touch.

It was sufficiently evident that if Rose Marling was sensible of any personal peril threatening, she was not the young woman to shrink, aghast, from its encounter.

But Horace Allen's determination to jealously guard the safety of the woman he loved had not ended with his cautionary interview in her apartments.

If he could not be with her, he might at least be as near to her as the conventions would allow.

Consulting his watch while descending the stairs, he perceived with no little satisfaction that it was still comparatively early in the evening—half-past eight.

Proceeding to the janitor's rooms, on the basement floor, he mentioned his acquaintance with Miss Marling, and inquired if there

chanced to be a furnished room to let in the building.

The janitor, a man of some discrimination, had noticed Horace on his way up-stairs with Miss Marling, and had been somewhat prepossessed by his respectable and gentlemanly appearance.

"There's no single furnished room, sir," he replied, "but a whole furnished flat to let. The family formerly occupying it were dispossessed a fortnight ago for arrears of rent, and left their furniture as temporary security for money borrowed of the proprietor."

"Where is it located?"

"Third floor, north side."

This was two stories below and directly underneath Rose's flat, which was on the fifth floor, north side, the building being a double apartment or flat house, with most of the south side suites vacant by reason of their comparative undesirableness in the matter of imperfect light.

"What is the rent?"

"Twenty dollars a month."

"Here is a first month's rent in advance," and Horace promptly counted out the money.

"Give me a receipt, if you please." He presented the janitor with his business card. "I shall be back to take possession inside of an hour. Have no family, and shall desire the suite entirely to myself. By the way, are there fixtures for a grate-fire?"

"Yes, sir; in the parlor, or best room."

"Good! Have me a nice fire there against my return, with plenty of coal for its replenishment, and I will pay you fairly for the cost and your trouble."

The man readily assented, thinking that he had never had to do with a more satisfactory and off-hand tenant than this one.

An hour later, after a visit to his home for a valise of clothing and necessities, Horace Allen was in possession.

CHAPTER X.

A TERRIBLE VISITOR.

WITHOUT the faintest suspicion of what her faithful admirer was doing in the way of guarding her against possible harm, Rose Marling made everything secure in her apartments, and retired soon after he had separated from her.

Despite the wearing excitements and mental sufferings of the day—or perhaps by reason of them and the exhaustion or prostration they had produced—she was soon fast asleep, with the last of many prayers upon her lips for her erring brother's reformation and safety.

It was Rose's custom to sleep with her chamber door closed and the window wide open, even in the coldest weather.

She woke suddenly in the middle of the night to find her door slightly ajar, and a light shining through the narrow opening from the adjoining parlor, though she remembered perfectly well to have extinguished it before retiring.

At the same time a series of cautious movements in the parlor reached her ears.

In short, she was suddenly confronted with the startling and unavoidable impression that a robber was making free with her premises.

Rose was exceptionally fearless and self-controlled for a woman.

After one hurried leap, her heart resumed its accustomed equable beat, and, with compressed lips and high-strung fibers, she felt her spirits rise with the emergency.

Her first move was to noiselessly reach down and feel for her revolver, which should have been on a low chair close to the head of her bed, and between it and the door.

Gone!

Paralyzing discovery! and this also explained the door being ajar; the marauder having evidently opened it with the express purpose of rendering her defenseless before entering upon his depredations.

But Rose Marling was not the young woman to be more than momentarily disconcerted in the face of any danger.

Noiselessly as a specter, she slipped out of bed, and in a few minutes had got on the greater part of her clothes without the slightest sound betraying her. She did not attempt to put on her slippers, however.

Then she glided to the door, and peeped out.

For an instant what she saw there caused her blood to run cold.

In the full glare of the gaslight, a man was coolly exploring the contents of the disguised trunk, which was wide open before him, after being unceremoniously stripped of its chintz cushions and drapery—and that man the terrible evil genius of her house and fortunes, Max Marling!

She recognized him on the instant, notwithstanding that his back was partly turned toward her, and in spite of what she could see of his face being disguised by a heavy false beard, while he was also clad in the rough garb of a laboring man.

For the rest, it would have been impossible to mistake the enormous bulkiness of frame, the immense breadth of shoulders, and, strangely

combined with this seeming unwieldiness, the cat-like grace and alertness of every movement, all of which went to make up the decidedly unique personality of the man.

In another moment Rose Marling had mastered her alarm, and experienced in its place burning resentment and defiance.

So, Horace's warning had been all but prophetic, and here was the arch-enemy of her house—perhaps her father's mysterious captor, if not his actual murderer, and at all events his undoer, and the blackener of his good name—in quest of those very documents, which might be her sole weapon against his continued diabolism in the future!

Might not the climax of her weak-minded brother's moral ruin likewise be laid to this demon's charge?

Rose noiselessly gritted her teeth. Oh, if he had not deprived her of her revolver while she slept! In that event she believed in her heart of hearts that she would have shot him dead, deliberately and ruthlessly, from where she stood.

As it was, should she tamely submit to this cowardly and nonchalant appropriation of her dear father's last and almost only consignment to her keeping?—for that the scoundrel would sooner or later alight upon the secret to the false bottom of the trunk was not to be doubted for a moment.

Never!

After a swift review of the situation, her determination was made.

Watching her opportunity when, in the course of his rummagings, his back was completely turned toward her, she opened the door stealthily—luckily it did not betray her by so much as a creak—and glided across the parlor floor behind him in the direction of the open kitchen door.

She gained and entered it without detection. Then, in the semi-darkness of the kitchen, she breathed freer, her nerve and courage redoubling.

On the table-of-all-work, near the cooking-range, was the knife with which it was her custom to cut the bread.

It was stout-bladed, but also long and sharp-pointed, and with a strong ebony handle.

In an instant it was in her delicate but firm grasp.

Then she glided back into the parlor, and the next instant she was close behind the depredator, and he still unconscious of her presence.

Not a moment too soon, either! He was stooping over the trunk, the secret of the false bottom was at his command, and then, as he partly straightened up, with a sort of exultant hiss, the precious package was in his clutch.

Rose struck her left hand heavily and fiercely upon the scoundrel's enormous shoulder, and, as he turned with a start and an exclamation, the sharp-pointed, firmly-grasped knife in her right pricked his fat bull-neck so keenly as to draw blood.

"Max Marling!" exclaimed the girl, in a species of suppressed fury; "villain that you are, drop that package and take yourself off, or you are a dead man!"

As he confronted her in his first astonishment, the pair afforded a contrast such as is not often presented in the melodrama of real or fictitious life.

He, a species of handsome monster, or bulky satyr, with the half-startled, half-mocking look with which he met her threatening attitude; she, not more than two-thirds dressed, beautiful in her very pallor, and with her long lustrous black hair falling unconfined down her back below the waist, but with the glory of indomitable moral and physical courage in the statuesque pose of her superb womanliness of figure, in the dauntless gleam of her dark eyes, in every strung fiber of her lithe, nervous frame!

It was like a Caliban suddenly confronted by one of Dian's peerless nymphs; or demon brute strength in the grasp of one of the guardian cherubim with her fiery sword.

Then the ruffian, drawing back and shaking off the young woman's grasp with a sudden, surprisingly rapid movement, albeit that the blood was still slightly trickling from his neck, burst into a low, not unmusical laugh.

"What, Rose, my pretty little kinswoman of old!" he exclaimed: "so you have discovered me in my sly little visit to you, after all?"

"Those papers!" she demanded, white to the lips with suppressed fury.

"Why, I just want to look them over first, my dear!"

"Restore them to me, or"—she finished the sentence by clutching her weapon closer, and crouching slightly for a spring, her teeth set, her eyes ablaze. "Oh, if you had not deprived me of my pistol, or even if Ralph were but still here!"

Instead of being further impressed by this resolute demonstrativeness, her concluding words seemed to lash him into a brief fury.

"Curse the boy!" he growled; "so he got off with a thousand dollars of that swag, even outwitting me, while my bold operators— But the little wretch shall be made to pay for that."

If there might have been a ghost of relenting

in Rose's purpose before the utterance of these self-incriminating admissions, it vanished now.

"Thief, scoundrel, corrupter of the weak, destroyer of the unwary!" she cried, hoarsely. "That package—give it back to me, or you die!"

"Away, girl!" and with his disengaged hand he produced a revolver by an incredibly swift movement, but apparently with no immediate intention of using it. "Or stay, Rose! why cannot you enjoy life with me as my bride? How gloriously beautiful you have grown!" with a devouring glitter of his strangely magnetic black eyes.

A low, menacing cry burst from her compressed lips.

Then suddenly precipitating herself upon him like a pantheress, she drove her knife full against his mighty breast just over the heart.

CHAPTER XI.

A UNIQUE VILLAIN'S PROWESS.

To the infuriated young woman's unmitigated astonishment, however, the descending knife, which might otherwise have well pierced the burly scoundrel's breast, so true and powerfully straight home had been its driving stroke in her frenzied hand straight for his heart, but pierced his clothing, and then, striking something as of adamant or steel beneath, broke short off at the hilt, leaving the latter useless in her grasp!

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed the ruffian, throwing her off by a swift, repulsing movement of his giant arm, and at the same time contemptuously putting his revolver out of sight; "your last tooth gone, my beauty. Fool! will you never learn what it is to contend with me?"

"The package!" she demanded again, half beside herself with rage.

"Away!"

He made a lightning-like gesture toward her with his disengaged open hand—open, and with the fingers hooked extended, like the talons of an eagle—a sudden look of vast and mysterious power at the same time rushing into his face and eyes.

But brave Rose Marling was one but little impressible to such influences as the so-called hypnotic power.

True, she did recoil for a single instant, with a stunned, helpless sensation, as if under the shock of an electric battery; but it was only for the single instant; and then, with a ringing cry for help, she sprang at the giant's throat with an impetuosity that there was no evading, clawing out like a cat, and actually clutching the precious package out of his hand.

Her cry was answered by an encouraging shout from somewhere below, and there was a distant sound of doors being opened and slammed.

The ruffian gave a sort of infuriated roar.

He could not at once recover the package, so agile were Rose's movements, but he had her in his enormous grasp, and, in another wrathful instant, might have crushed the life out of her with scarcely an exertion of his tremendous strength.

But at that instant the door was torn open and Horace Allen rushed into the room, cocked revolver in hand.

"Out of the way, Rose!" shouted the young man.

She obeyed, releasing herself from the scoundrel's momentarily weakened clutch with a glad cry, and Horace, not six paces distant, fired point-blank at the scoundrel's broad chest.

There was not the slightest perceptible effect, notwithstanding that the bullet must inevitably have found its mark.

Then, with another baffled roar, the bulky giant threw himself upon the rescuer with the rapidity of a serpent at its spring.

Horace Allen, besides possessing a dauntless courage, was tall and powerfully framed, with no little knowledge of wrestling and fisticuffs—in fact, was a not inconspicuous member of the New York Athletic Club.

But he was of no more account in Max Marling's stupendous grasp than a half-grown jaguar in the deadly boa's coil.

In an instant he had been hurled against the partition wall with such force as to make the whole house tremble, besides shaking down several pictures from their fastenings, with a crash of splintering frame and breaking glass.

For an instant the Hercules stood irresolute, and then—for the entire house was by this time in something of an uproar—he shook his ponderous fist menacingly.

"Another time!" he growled, and darted out of the door, his footfalls, which should have been so heavy, making scarcely a sound in the speed of his retreat.

Horace had recovered almost immediately from his overthrow, crushing as it had been.

A glance showed him that Rose retained the recovered package.

Then, in spite of a warning cry of "Stop, Horace, stop! it is useless! Don't you realize that he wears concealed armor?" he regained the revolver which had been dashed out of his grasp, and, with a bound, was on the trail of the ruffian's retreat.

Coming in view of the man's bulky outline in

the semi-darkness of the second flight of stairs below, he fired again, this time squarely between the vast expanse of his shoulders.

No impression was made, while Max did not even deign to turn, but noiselessly and rapidly continued his descent.

Horace followed, repeating the shot again and again, but with no better effect; and finally, at the bottom of the last landing, he hurled the empty weapon with all his strength, striking the fugitive what would have been a stunning blow in the back of the head, but which seemed of no more effect than if it had been expended on an iron pillar of the elevated railroad that passed in front of the house.

At the street entrance, however, the baffled depredator vouchsafed to turn upon and seize his plucky pursuer once again.

"Waspl insect!" hissed the master-ruffian, while once more swiftly ingulfing the young man in his all but strangling grasp; "have you never read of the crab at the heel of Hercules? I could murder you with a turn of my wrist if I chose, but—you're not worth the risk."

And then, hurling his opponent far back, almost the entire length of the dim hall to the stairway's foot, he opened the door and disappeared.

But again recovering almost on the instant, though not this time without feeling sore and badly shaken up, Horace again followed.

He rushed to the door to perceive the fugitive being tackled again, by an athletic man on the opposite side of the street, though apparently with no better success than in his own case.

Then he saw the former flying up the street, after which a momentary faintness overcame him, and he leaned against the entrance for support.

Recovering from this, he reflected that Rose might have suffered more injury than had been apparent at his fleeting survey of the original situation.

This caused him to hasten back to her, merely pausing by the way to give a brief intimation of what had occurred to the janitor, his family and others who were by this time thronging the stairways and halls.

Re-entering Rose's little parlor, pale and haggard, but with a reassuring smile, and closing the door behind him, he found her standing almost in the same attitude in which he vaguely remembered to have left her.

That is, she was still by the open and disordered trunk, with the recovered package yet clutched in her grasp; but, now that her personal peril was a thing of the past, there was a dazed, bewildered, almost terrified look in her face, in place of the heroic, if frenzied expression that he remembered to have last noted there.

"Be of good heart, Miss Marling!" he said, rather diffidently approaching her with something of a tremor in his smile, for he was still badly shaken up. "See; it must have been by that same door that the villain forced his entrance. Observe how cleverly the lock has been picked, the bolt forced back, and—"

He paused bewilderedly, ecstatically at the glance—a glance full of gratitude and admiration, if not of something better and dearer still—that she slowly turned upon him.

Then her words and action were such as to complete his scarcely realizable bliss.

"Thank God that you are safe, my love, my darling!" she murmured, tottering toward him; "thank God for it! thank God for it!" And she sunk, fainting, into his arms.

Like most young men of his age, Horace Allen had doubtless not infrequently had his inner visions of the earthly paradise as created by an honest heart's triumph in its first and purest passion, but all was as formless mist, imperfect shadow, compared with the reality of this fleeting and delirious moment.

And it was only for a moment, after all.

In another instant she had recovered from her demi-swoon, torn herself from his grasp, and repulsed all but fiercely the kisses that he was raining upon her face and hands!

"Away!" she exclaimed, peremptorily; "it must not, cannot, shall not be! What, with my brother a thief, and that monster as a half-family connection, you think I would permit it? Not another word! But," half-fearfully, "do not leave me! Come, my friend, we will converse of other things—of anything but this horror!"

He had recovered his self-possession, at least in part.

"As you please, Rose—for the present," he said. "But wait!" commandingly, as she was about to return the package to the bottom of the trunk. "Condition or no condition, promise or no promise, this fatal thing you shall no longer keep in your possession," and he uncereemoniously took the package out of her hand, and placed it in his pocket.

CHAPTER XII.

WIRT WALDEN'S CHASE.

WIRT WALDEN was a detective of many experiences, and of the grip-and-holdfast variety. Indeed, for the pre-eminent possession of these valuable professional qualities, he was already known among his associates at Headquarters

both as "Holdfast Walden" and "Rusher Walden," while among others, by reason of his quiet and urbane demeanor off duty no less than on, he was as popularly and distinctively characterized as "Wily Walden, the Gentleman Detective."

It will be readily surmised that he had remained on watch of the building in which Rose Marling made her domicile in the hope that the fugitive Ralph Marling might be tempted to pay a secret last visit to his sister, and thus enable him, the detective, to effect his arrest, as a reward for the numerous unexpected disappointments to which he had already been subjected after painstaking visits and inquiries among all the embryo criminal's whilom surreptitious haunts.

The turmoil in the building, followed by the sudden exit of the depredator, Max Marling, had therefore been a complete surprise to the watchful Walden.

Nevertheless, he had recognized, or thought he recognized, the burly figure of the Virginia adventurer on the instant, and had not hesitated to spring upon him forthwith from his place of concealment in an opposite doorway as soon as the latter, after darting across the street, had emerged from under the shadow of the Elevated Railway structure, which occupied at that point nearly the entire width of the thoroughfare.

"Ah, Major Ludgate red-handed at last?" blandly observed the detective. "Here, my man, I want you!"

And, with accompanying rattle of a pair of handcuffs in due readiness, he closed with the Corpulent Mystery forthwith.

But, for once in his life at least, his holdfast characterization was at fault.

Strong, apt at wrestling and fisticuffs, and trained athlete that he was, with muscles of iron, the squirming activity of a weasel, and a grip like hooks of steel, he was a child in the colossal embrace that suddenly ingulfed him, as it were, in a maelstrom of demoniac power.

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed the giant, in the velvety voice that contradicted its source strangely; "so you mistake me for Major Ludgate, do you, my little man? Well, here goes on my own account, anyway!"

With that he momentarily released his breathless assailant, to tear the handcuffs from his clutch and snap them asunder as if they were of brittlest crystal in lieu of tempered steel!

Then, suddenly seizing the detective afresh, he cast him from him with tremendous violence.

After this, he turned and sped southward with amazing speed in the direction of the nearest station, toward which a down-town Elevated train was heard slowly puffing and rumbling.

The detective had, however, luckily alighted on his feet, after being cast a full rod or more, though the catapult force of the shock caused him to stagger back as many more before he could recover his senses and his equilibrium.

Then there was but an instant's steadying pause, and he was after the big man like a bolt from a gun.

The down train—nearly empty, for it was well on to three in the morning—was before them at the station; and it was just moving out as they both rushed through the gates, and tumbled upon the same car-platform, one after the other, the fugitive first.

"Holy smoke!" exclaimed the brakeman, slamming the platform gate shut, as his uncereemonious passengers came together in a clashing shock, "what murder's up?" and he darted into the car, closing the door behind him, in a sort of panic.

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed the Colossus again, in that strangely soft but demoniac voice. "But, have it again, then! Throw-off is a good dog!"

"Holdfast is a better!" shouted the detective.

With that, revolver in hand, he fearlessly hurled himself once more upon the giant, thrusting the muzzle of the weapon into his very mouth.

The train in even this brief time had attained its fullest speed, and was approaching a brightly lighted street corner, airily strung across in every direction, a few feet below the level of the tracks, by an intricate network of telegraph, telephone and electric light wires.

Without another word, the giant seemed to fairly spit the pistol-point out of his mouth, firmly as it had seemed planted therein, and then, with a lightning-like twist of his massive wrist and arm, it was sent spinning away over his head, exploding harmlessly in its fall to the street.

Then once more was the dauntless detective encompassed in that terrific bug, torn and uprooted from his foothold, as the fir-tree by the Alpine storm, and once more hurled away—but this time out into space at a height of at least forty feet above *terra firma*!

Walden had been but a babe in the Colossus's grasp.

"Ha, ha, ha!" softly laughed the villain, leaning over the gate and exultantly looking back. "Well, hang and burn and roast and writhe there till the hot but invisible currents scorch the life out of you! Good riddance, on my life!"

Then he drew back, with a demoniac chuckle of satisfaction, and imperturbably made himself ready to quit the train at the next station, for halting at which the train was already beginning to slow up.

And what was the meaning of those terribly exultant words?

Wirt Walden's fall to the street below, after being hurled from the train at the brightly-lighted street corner alluded to, was stopped by the network of variously-employed wires, which had at first sagged down, and then supported his weight.

And there he hung in mid-air, speechless and writhing in intolerable pain.

His body, both at the back of the neck and in the small of the back—while a multitude of finer and harmless wires rendered the chief support to his weight—had fallen directly across two live electric wires, and he felt as if he was being both consumed and torn in pieces, shred by shred, fiber by fiber, by incandescent pincers in the hands of torturing fiends.

Blindly stretching out his hands for relief, the unfortunate man unconsciously gripped yet another electric wire.

This completed the full connection of the deadly currents, and, as a consequence, the man's agony, if it had been excruciating before, was now simply inconceivable.

It was too much even for the speechlessness which had thus far possessed him.

Torn from the inmost recesses of his tortured organism, a single cry—a terrible one—burst from his lips.

Did he dream (for, strange as it may seem, he still retained his consciousness to a certain degree), or was it answered?

Yes, from seemingly far away at first, and then clear, strong and unmistakable from directly underneath him.

"Drop that wire you are grabbing!" roared a voice. "That's it! Now try to raise your back—never mind if the other wire does cut your neck. Good for you! Hi, Tom! fetch on that ladder!"

By the exertion of an immense will-power, no less than muscular strength, the detective had managed to obey these injunctions, as severally announced, and with the result of an immediate and tremendous relief.

Indeed, save for a dull tingling and throbbing pain throughout his frame, and a harsh rasping where the one wire cut his neck as he made an arch of his body, with his ankles resting upon other and harmless wires, the relief was such as to be comparatively blissful.

"Good for you!" shouted the voice again. "Stick to it as you are, and we'll have you all right in two minutes."

Then there was the rattle as of a ladder-end against the near-at-hand railroad structure.

A moment later strong hands laid hold of the terribly situated detective, he found himself lifted off the wires with his face to the ladder between two powerful men, and with a little more trouble was safely assisted to the ground.

CHAPTER XIII.

HOLDFAST IS A GOOD DOG.

AFTER a staggering effort or two Walden found himself able to keep his feet, though still suffering intense needle-like pain, coming and going in recurrent waves.

Then he glanced wildly but intelligently around him.

That glance, together with a few kindly words of explanation on the part of his rescuers, served to make clear his all but miraculous escape from a horrible fate.

They were electric wire line men on their way home from late duty in the dynamo plant, while a house-painter's ladder, which had providentially been left standing against one of the corner buildings, together with their being experts in the emergency, were the chief features in the rescue that had been so opportunely effected.

"By Jingo!" commented one of the men, eying the detective with some admiration; "but you're a tough man to keep your feet after that experience. Isn't he, Tom?"

"That he is, Jake!" replied the other. "There isn't a man in our gang but would be laid up for a fortnight after the like of it. But, as it is, another three minutes would have laid you stiff, sir."

"A thousand thanks to both of you," said Walden, slowly. "I think I am beginning to get over it—all but my hands." He opened and shut them convulsively. "The palms seem burnt off to the bone."

"That is only apparent," observed the first speaker. "Look at them, and you will see that they are only inflamed, without being scorched, though, as my pal here says, another minute or two might have blackened 'em, besides doing for you. But, look here, friend; you're still fuller of home-made lightning than a fire-ball."

"I believe you."

"Are you a good runner?"

"Yes."

"Then cut a streak for a good half a mile. It will do you more good than anything else.

And as soon after that as you can, lie off in a piping hot bath, with two quarts of rock salt in the water."

"I'll do it! Friends, here is my card. Ask for me at Police Headquarters almost any day before nine A. M., and I will thank you more substantially."

"Wirt Walden, detective!" read off the line-man called Tom. "Thunder! not Holdfast Walden, as they call him?"

"That is I. Good-night."

"But hold on! You haven't told us how you came to be dangling up yonder on the wires."

"Another time!"

And, suiting the action to the first word of advice proffered, the detective started up the avenue at a tremendous sprint.

Knowing that Major Ludgate, or whoever his late opponent might be, must long ere this be beyond his immediate further pursuit, he headed back for the building in which Miss Marling lived.

The run did him a world of good, though still far from setting him altogether to rights.

Perceiving her suite of rooms to be still lighted up—indeed, all the inmates of the house were still more or less wide-awake and astir, for that matter—he gained admission, and then, ascending to her apartments, knocked at the door.

"Ah, it is Mr. Walden!" said Horace, opening the door. "Come in! and be introduced to Miss Marling." The ceremony was accomplished. "We haven't yet quite recovered our composure after the sensation of the night, as you doubtless perceive. But in the first place, tell us how you fared with the depredator."

The detective modestly took the chair that was cordially proffered him, and then, to their amazement, he briefly related his extraordinary experience.

Horace, in return, told him of the affair so far as Miss Marling and himself had been concerned.

The detective's private opinion of Miss Marling's heroism was evidently of an unmixed complimentary nature, though he did not say so, and only once or twice stole a furtive and curious glance at her during the recital.

But Rose, on her own part, was not so reticent of her feelings.

"I suppose, Mr. Walden," she observed, "you were so opportunely on hand because you were watching this house in the hope of effecting the arrest of—of my brother, Ralph Marling?"

"It is true, ma'am," admitted the detective, with much simplicity. "But I don't mind saying that I would willingly have foregone such an opportunity, even if it had been afforded me, if I only might have had the luck to clap the bracelets on the recent disturber of your peace, the Corpulent Mystery."

Rose looked somewhat softened at this.

"But, look you, Walden," interposed Horace Allen, smiling. "From the way you say he disposed of the especial set of prison jewelry you had in readiness, I don't see how that would have done much good."

"Oh, there's bracelets and bracelets," replied the detective, quietly. "If some break, there are others that would hold anything—an elephant almost."

"And that's just about what that scoundrel is, in point of pure muscularity, at least," said Horace, reflectively; "an elephant in strength, a panther in activity—or a kangaroo, I scarcely know which."

Instead of answering, Walden turned his eyes upon Miss Marling inquiringly.

"I'd like to ask you a question or two ma'am," he observed, respectfully.

"You are at liberty to do so, sir," she promptly replied.

"Did you recognize the big man who has caused all this disturbance, ma'am?"

To Horace's surprise, Rose answered a little doubtfully, after a short pause:

"I think so."

"What!" exclaimed the detective; "are you not sure?"

"How could I be," coldly, "when he was disguised?"

"Still, his form, his great bulk, his other striking characteristics! and I have been told that the man had some relations with your family, miss, in the past."

"Still," slowly, "I am not sure I could swear to his identity. By the way, Mr. Walden, whom do you take the desperate man to have been?"

"Max Marling, alias Major Ludgate, otherwise the Corpulent Mystery."

"But are you quite sure?"

"Almost to a dead certainty, though he himself denied the identity. However, I am sorry you are not more certain in the matter, miss, as there will doubtless be some difficulty in convicting him, though I am bound to arrest him in short order just the same. I suppose you, sir," turning to Horace, "could hardly swear to the man's identity?"

"I am afraid not, if his face was disguised," was the thoughtful response. "And, unless in that scoundrel's person to-night, I never to my knowledge saw the adventurer you name in my life."

"Thank you," observed the detective, polite-

ly, but disappointedly. "I shall then wish you good-night, or rather good-morning."

He arose, but reeled a little, and caught the back of the chair for support.

"Oh, that terrible adventure—you are still suffering from the electricity!" cried Rose, with impulsive sympathy. "You mustn't think of going yet, sir. There's a spare bed in yonder, where you can lie down."

But Walden said he felt much better—that it had been only a momentary dizziness, thanked her, and took his departure forthwith.

"Oh, Rose!" exclaimed Horace, half-reproachfully; "how strange of you to discover so suddenly that you might not be able to identify that unique scoundrel!"

To his astonishment, she burst into a convulsive fit of tearless, half-hysterical sobbing that was more pitiable than the stormiest weeping could have been.

"Oh, my friend!" she cried, clasping her hands. "What a disgrace upon the name I bear! And do you not see how wretched, how unstrung I am? Can't you understand? Can't you understand?"

CHAPTER XIV.

SEEING IT OUT.

THE Holdfast Detective quitted the building with set jaws and compressed lips, notwithstanding that he was still suffering no little bodily pain.

"Let them stammer and dally as they may," he muttered; "I am going to see this thing out, and now!"

Notwithstanding the unconscionableness of the hour, he headed direct for the Police Headquarters in Mulberry street.

Arriving in the detective bureau, he was so fortunate as to find that Inspector Byrnes was still about the premises in personal attendance upon a big forgery and embezzlement case that had newly come up.

Leaving word for his chief, that he would be on hand with an interesting report in half an hour, Walden utilized the interval of waiting by treating himself to the hot salt bath which the electric lineman had so earnestly advised him to take.

This recuperated him wonderfully, and he was almost himself again when he once more repaired to the chief.

The inspector was there awaiting his report, and, tireless man of iron that he was, and looking as ruddy, big-mustached and keen-eyed as if he had not been on arduous duty for nearly thirty consecutive hours without an hour's respite of nature's sweet restorer.

"Humph!" grunted the chief, after silently listening to his subordinate's report; "a tough experience, sure enough! And the young lady can't positively identify the scoundrel as the Corpulent Mystery?"

"She says she can't."

"My dear Wirt," smiling quizzingly, "never doubt a pretty woman's word—at least, not aloud, not demonstratively. And they do say that this typewriter of Mr. Hardman's is more than ordinarily pretty."

"She is by long odds the handsomest young person I ever saw," replied the detective, quietly.

"Good!" with a graver air and a dismissive gesture. "Well, of course you can arrest the fellow on suspicion, and we must take our chances of holding him."

"That is what I want your authority for doing, inspector."

"You have it. A common haunt of the man's is the nest of disreputable gin-mills in the vicinity of Thirty-first street and Sixth avenue. But you can scarcely feel like undertaking it immediately, after the shaking up you have had, though"—glancing at the clock on the wall—"this is about as good a time as any for that gang. The caldron thereabouts ought to be fairly stewing over by this."

"I shall undertake it, inspector, right off by preference."

"Good! but you'll want an associate or two?"

"No, thanks; alone or not at all!" And Walden's smoldering eyes flashed up fitfully.

"As you please; though I should think from the experience you have had that you would think twice before wishing to tackle the Corpulent Mystery single-handed again."

"It is on account of the experience I have had that I wish and intend to tackle him single-handed again."

"Very well. And you might find Williams browsing around in that neighborhood for what he may devour. It is his old precinct."

Walden started to go when the inspector called him back.

"As to your failure to find the boy thief, young Marling?" the latter queried. "Do you think he has skipped?"

"I think just this," inspector, replied Walden, slowly: "That Miss Marling and her bookkeeper friend know a plagued sight more about that young rascal's whereabouts than you or I do."

"Ah, I understand. Good-luck!" And the inspector touched a bell as Walden disappeared.

The former wrote rapidly on a slip of paper, and had it in readiness by the time an orderly

made his appearance in answer to the summons.

"Here is a description," said Inspector Byrnes, passing the slip to the orderly. "Name, as written. Ralph Marling; charge, heavy theft from his employer. Have it telegraphed instantly to the police departments of Montreal, Quebec, and all the larger Canadian border-towns. Information as to fugitive's whereabouts only required at present. Stay; if any one inquires for me again, I am at home and in bed."

The official vanished, and the sturdy inspector, putting on his hat and overcoat, lost but little time in following his example.

As for Wirt Walden, he had no sooner reached the notorious quarter of the city that had been indicated by his chief, than he came to a pause on one of the street-corners in a momentarily speculative mood.

It was five o'clock of a Sunday morning, frosty and clear, and still very dark; but the vile locality was as wide-awake, to all appearances, as ten hours previously. The "rigid enforcement of the excise law" to the contrary notwithstanding, the saloons, dives and concert-saloons, so-called, that elbowed each other at every turn were ablaze with gas and electric lights, and noisy with coming and going throngs, whether the prohibited liquid poisons were being dispensed openly or in disguise. Drunken men were everywhere. Miserable women and girls, with wild laughter on their lips, and perhaps wilder despair in their hearts, prowled the walks like the painted ghosts of a dead world. Policemen lounged idly about, yawning, swinging their clubs, or taking a more or less languid or lively interest in their accursed surroundings.

As the inspector had suggested, the caldron was fairly stewing over.

And while the detective was meditating on his first essay to find his man, he was approached by a well-known official figure—a tall, slender, athletic man whose hat was pulled down well over his eyes, and whose uniform was almost wholly concealed by a long, loose, closely-buttoned civilian's overcoat.

He accordingly made his official obeisance to Inspector Alexander Williams, for this man was none other than he.

"What is up, Walden?" demanded the inspector, in a low voice and with a seemingly indifferent air.

The detective briefly described the situation.

"Your man is over in yonder," promptly responded the inspector, and he indicated an opposite corner saloon, where a crowd of tough-looking citizens were idling about the doors and triangular vestibule. "Best not get in a row with any one on entering, or you may miss your game. But I sha'n't mind keeping an eye on you."

The detective thanked him, and straightway sauntered across the street toward the saloon in question.

As a general rule, "toughs" must be pretty drunk to offer to molest a detective policeman in the open street. But the majority of this particular gang chanced to be just that—namely, fighting drunk; and, moreover, Walden was well known by sight, no less than by reputation, by the fraternity, besides being exceptionally unpopular.

No sooner had the detective approached the entrance than two young ruffians set up a sham scuffle between themselves, and then managed to tumble against him with a shock.

Walden ached to give it to them hot and heavy, but policy forbade.

"Hold on, Trimmer!" he said, good-naturedly. "If you must skylark with the 'Scooper,' try to keep off my toes while you are at it."

A double volley of profanity was his response, and then the rest of the loafers, hurrying out from the saloon vestibule, began to hustle him.

Walden's patience was almost exhausted, when a cheery voice called out calmly:

"Now's your time to pass in; I shall attend to these chaps."

Then there was a sort of windmill of fistcuffs, men were bowled over one on top of another like so many tenpins, and in less than a minute such of the crowd as were not prostrate were scattered like chaff before the wind.

This opportune cyclone was nothing more than ex-Captain Alexander Williams going through a small section of New York's "dangerous classes" on his muscle.

"Here, you, Hungry Joe!" observed the redoubtable officer, blandly, "what did I tell you about keeping out of this precinct?"

Then the individual named was seized, as a hawk would clutch its prey, soundly drubbed till he whined for mercy like a lashed cur; a parting kick sent him flying after his kindred spirits; the incipient row was at an end, with scarcely more than a passing ruffle on the equanimity of the vice-loaded locality, and all was as serene as a summer sky.

CHAPTER XV.

THE CORPULENT MYSTERY.

In the mean time, the detective, taking advantage of this timely outside diversion, had quietly entered the saloon.

It was crowded and noisy, but with no actual violation of the excise restrictions on view.

Sitting a little apart from the rest at a small table, a newspaper in hand, a coffee-cup containing some beverage or stimulant at his elbow, was a fashionably dressed, enormously muscular and corpulent man, to whom all the others, drunk or sober, boisterous or reticent, seemed to accord a certain degree of consideration and respect.

The detective's heart gave an exultant and resentful bound.

The man's handsome, but animal like face was as plump as a fresh-picked partridge, and, barring a well-trained, coal-black mustache, perfectly smooth-shaven. Softly, respectfully across the bridge of his well shaped nose rested a pair of gold-rimmed eyeglasses, through which he was calmly perusing the paper before him.

He might have been a successful stock-broker, a retired boss barber, or a patronizer of the turf in a quiet, gentlemanly way.

In fact, save in the matter of corporeality, he seemed about the last man in the world who could be mistaken for the huge, rough-clad, bearded ruffian of the exceptional exploits in which the detective had recently and so sorely shared.

But Wirt Walden, whose entrance had apparently not been particularly noticed, was morally certain that this man and the man he was looking for were one and the same.

Getting himself in readiness, he stepped up to him, and laid his hand upon his shoulder.

"Major Ludgate, I presume?" he asked politely.

The eyes were slowly raised and fixed upon him—mysteriously magnetic eyes, though now with a half-amused, half-puzzled expression that it was hard to believe could only be assumed.

"That is my name, sir," was the reply, in a polite, mellifluous voice.

"I want you!" loudly.

And then, in a twinkling, a pair of handcuffs—exceptionally strong ones, with which the detective had specially provided himself for this longed-for occasion—were on the Corpulent Mystery's wrists.

The man gave a slight start, there was a fleeting glint as of stealthily-flashed poniards in the dark eyes, while he glanced contemptuously from the detective to the irons as if a wrench of his massive arms might snap the chain-connection of the latter with consummate ease, and then he was calm and undemonstrative as before.

"Some mistake, I fancy," he quietly observed.

"None at all! Come with me!"

"Why, of course, if indispensable!"

"It is indispensable."

"But, why this arrest?" deprecatingly.

"Vouchsafe an explanation, I beg of you!"

"It is on authority—and suspicion. Let that suffice you. Come along!"

And Walden partly turned, cocked revolver in hand, to confront an angry and murmuring crowd of ruffians, well-dressed and otherwise, that were beginning to hem him round.

"Stand back, and hands off!" he coolly exclaimed. "The first man who offers to interfere with me is a dead man!"

But it was an exceptionally desperate crowd which even his cocked revolver and iron demeanor, backed by a reputation for hardihood second to none other in his profession, might have failed to intimidate, save for the action of the arrested man himself.

"My friends," said the latter, majestically rising and managing to put on his hat, "you know," with a peculiar smile, "that I am a rigidly law-abiding man. It is my express intention that this officer shall not be interfered with in the exercise of his duty—judiciously mistaken as it chances to be in this instance. Mr. Detective, there is my overcoat. Oblige me by throwing it over my shoulders, as you must perceive," with a jocular glance at his manacles, "that I am somewhat inconvenienced from getting inside of it in the orthodox way. Thanks!" as his captor complied with the request. "Now I am with you."

But the surrounding desperadoes, who slowly followed the pair as they moved away, were still moody and dangerous.

"Say but the word, major," called out a voice, "and we'll dance all over the fly-cop in a minute!"

The detective gave no heed, while his prisoner merely looked back to wag his head deprecatingly.

Then, just at the entrance, a thin, evil-looking man, with an expression of Satanic intellectuality, who might be tersely described as a criminal prodigy, suddenly leaned forward from a knot of others, and peered, piercingly, first into the officer's and then into the prisoner's face.

It was the notorious Billy Porter, probably one of the ablest and most absolutely conscienceless all-round criminals that ever escaped the hangman's noose—the accredited chief "remover" of his erstwhile pal, George Howard, and the friend of Irving in that worthy's

doubly-fatal bar-room duel with his fellow-criminal, Walsh, in that very vicinity but a few years previous.

"Yes, major," said this man, in a low, incisive voice, "a single word from you will set the ball to rolling."

The prisoner again shook his head protestingly.

"Stand aside, Billy," the detective calmly remarked, "or I'll blow a hole through you!"

He then reached the sidewalk with his man, and forthwith hailed a passing hack whose driver he recognized as an acquaintance and a thoroughly trustworthy man.

Inspector Williams had incontinently disappeared, after performing the outside service that has been recounted, and satisfying himself that the detective could manage his case single-handed thereafter.

"Adieu, my friends!" benignantly remarked the Corpulent Mystery, turning to the crowd with a jocular movement toward lifting his hat when about to step into the hack in advance of his captor. "We shall meet again, I trust, when this painstaking but misguided young man shall have discovered his mistake. Eh, my friend?" with a glance at the detective.

"Get in!" ordered the latter, impatiently.

When they had driven off, coaches and cabs were everywhere in request, that the reception of the distinguished prisoner at Headquarters might be noted by his associates.

Some of these preceded the arrival of the coach thither, and, moreover, Inspector Williams himself was standing with other officers on the white marble steps when it finally drew up at the entrance in the frosty early-morning light.

But, wonderful to relate, in place of its accustomed driver, the Corpulent Mystery himself sat alone on the box, urbane, smiling, fetterless, and handling the ribbons with consummate ease and phlegmatism.

"Morning, inspector!" he called out, cheerily.

"Fearing that I was wanted here, I have just driven over to give myself up."

The crowd of rascals who had preceded him to the seldom-desired goal burst into a cheer, though doubtless no less puzzled than the rest as to what had exactly happened.

Inspector Williams advanced angrily toward the coach, a stalwart member of the "finest" at his side.

A downright puzzler, or mental facer, is invariably sufficient to put the most model of police officials in an ugly humor.

"What is the meaning of this?" he demanded, menacingly.

"The deuce!" blandly replied the big man on the box, chewing a straw; "just as I tell you, inspector—no more and no less."

"Where is the detective who had you in custody," sternly, "and the regular driver of this coach?"

"Inside, as a matter of course," with an air of surprise. "You really don't suppose I would subject those invaluable young men to the uncomfortable frigidity of an outside seat on such a morning as this—a Sunday morning, too!—when I am something of a whip myself?"

The inspector and his subordinate unceremoniously tore open the coach-door.

What they saw therein still remains a sensation in police circles and elsewhere.

The detective and the coachman were found sitting therein, insensible or stupefied, the former wearing upon his own wrists the strong and nickel-plated manacles that had so recently adorned those of the inscrutable Max Marling, alias Major Ludgate, otherwise the Corpulent Mystery.

CHAPTER XVI.

MYSTIFICATION.

"MAJOR LUDGATE" was at once placed in safe-keeping, while the detective and coachman, whose name was Reilly, were restored to consciousness with considerable difficulty.

Briefly, their account of the extraordinary manner in which they had been cozened amounted to this:

Soon after quitting the place of arrest, the coach was proceeding leisurely through an exceptionally narrow and deserted cross-street, when the detective, who had his eyes steadily fastened upon his prisoner as they sat opposite to each other, suddenly experienced, as he expressed it, a sensation as of a benumbing wave passing over him. Then he became vaguely aware that the prisoner was making mesmeric passes before him with his manacled hands, and in a few seconds, in spite of his determined efforts to snap the spell that was being woven around him, he had wholly lost consciousness.

To search the detective, and the key to the handcuffs, and transfer them from his own wrists to those of his captor, would have been but a minute's work on the part of the master-soundrel.

Having effected this stroke, he called to the coachman, in an assumed voice (according to Reilly's part of the story), to halt his horses and come to the window. It appeared that the latter was equally susceptible, "subjective," or impressible—whichever may be the more ap-

appropriate adjective—to the subtle mesmeric, or hypnotizing, power of the prisoner. At all events, he had been rendered similarly helpless on the desired opportunity offering. And such was the explanation of the mystery.

Inspector Byrnes, on being made acquainted with it later in the day, had at first laughed and then looked annoyed, while his colleague, without committing himself, did not see how the matter could be helped or kept out of the newspapers, while he was confident that no slur could be justly cast upon the "force" by the unfortunate occurrence.

Had Walden been a drinking man, or with a reputation less firmly established, there might have been some other explanation suggested than the extraordinary one furnished by the detective, and the coachman (likewise a man of unimpeachable veracity), but his temperance was notorious, while his integrity was like a rock.

"You can seek the rest of which you are evidently in great need, Walden," said Inspector Byrnes, gravely. "But try to be on hand, with Miss Marling and Mr. Allen, for this man's examination this evening. He is doubtless either a magnificent fraud, or such an exceptional power for evil—one or the other—that we must manage to hold him for indictment, if possible."

Haggard, pale and humiliated, the Holdfast Detective—what a bitter misnomer seemed the characterization now, though heretofore so hard earned and well-deserved!—could only bow his head submissively.

"Thank you, inspector," he replied, simply. "But allow me to express the opinion that if the man is a fraud, he is without a recorded equal this side of Cagliostro." And then, on his way out, clinching his hands, he muttered, with an oath, between his teeth: "But I'll have him dead to rights yet, and single-handed, too, or die in the attempt—I will, by Heaven!"

But, to abbreviate what might be an irrelevantly protracted episode, in the private examination that ensued they did not manage to hold the prisoner.

Neither Miss Marling, Horace Allen, nor Wirt Walden could or would swear positively to his identity with the adventurous depredator of the previous night; the prisoner on his own part coolly offered to bring a cloud of witnesses in proof of an *alibi*; no distinctive charge could very well be made against him with regard to his shrewd mesmerizing or otherwise occult ruse after being made a prisoner; and he was reluctantly released.

But Rose Marling did not escape the publicity she had so dreaded, after all.

The next day the newspapers were full of the story, in a more or less garbled form, and it remained the local sensation of the week.

Before being finally set at liberty, the Corpulent Mystery was brought before Inspector Byrnes, Inspector Williams and a few others being also present.

"Do you pretend to the exercise of any mesmeric or other occult power?" demanded the chief of the detective bureau.

"I pretend to nothing," was the bland reply. "I am a very simple and unpretentious person."

"Why did you not escape forthwith, after rendering your custodian and the hackman powerless?"

"Escape?" echoed the Mystery, in seeming amazement.

"Yes."

"But why should I have escaped, my dear Mr. Inspector? Only to be captured over again? Besides, though consciously innocent of any wrong-doing, I was in the hands of the law; and a profound, abiding respect for the law," solemnly, "is one of my chief and most virtuous characteristics. Sir, and gentlemen all, I may say that it is my boss stronghold." There was a general smile, which he deprecated with an earnest wave of the hand. "Besides, being erroneously accused of I knew not what at the time, it was my duty—a duty that I owed to my self-respect, sir—not to fly from, but to boldly face the charge, and crush it in the bud."

"Indeed?"

"Precisely so, Mr. Inspector."

"In that case, why did you resort at all to the extraordinary trick which you performed so surprisingly?"

Mr. Max Marling, alias Major Ludgate, otherwise the Corpulent Mystery, politely shaded with his shapely white hand, on which a rare diamond glistened bravely, a little amused smile that flickered under his exquisite black mustache.

"You will not be offended," he asked, gently, "if I am perfectly frank in my answer to that question, Mr. Inspector?"

"I shall not be offended."

"To be candid, then, it was all a little joke on my part, as a genial, ingenuous expression of my sovereign contempt for police regulations in general, and detectives in particular. I might as well add, Mr. Inspector, with confidential suavity, "that I am fond of my little joke—inordinately fond of it."

"So it would seem."

"Yes—am really glad you sympathize with

my harmless sportiveness in this line—and I might have carried my little joke yet further, for your special delectation, had I so chosen."

"Ah! in what way, if I may have the temerity to ask?"

"Don't mention it. In this way, then: By vacating the prison-cell—for the temporary enjoyment of whose sybaritic accommodations I shall ever remain your grateful and *unforgettable* debtor—as cleverly and unaccountably as I exchanged places and relative positions with my keen guardian, the *Holdfast* Detective, as I am told he is called, and his horsecultural coadjutor of the hackney coach—the odd adjective is my own, the coinage of my own poetic brain."

And he playfully tapped his forehead with a fat forefinger.

"Is not your real name Max Marling?"

"It is, sir."

"How did you acquire your present military title?"

"By heroic service in the dominions of his serene Highness, the Sultan of Timbuctoo."

"What is your present business?"

"I am," slowly and with intense gravity, "a capitalist."

"Ah, indeed! and how is your capital invested?"

"What! tell you that—let you into my golden secret? Now you are asking a little too much of my affability, my dear sir! I must be veracious or silent—sterling veracity being another of my strong moral 'pulls,' hence I chose the reticent rôle."

"What, then, does your capital chiefly consist of at present?"

"A deck of cards, a piercing intelligence, and a hold heart."

"Haven't you been suspected of exercising a sinister influence, or baleful power, over the youth, Ralph Marling, and similarly ill-balanced young men?"

"Likely enough," calmly.

"What is the nature of that influence?"

"The power that a powerful mind must ever exert over a weak one."

"Have you any regular and reputable employment, major?"

"Mr. Inspector, I have."

"What is it, pray?"

"The employment of strictly attending to my own affairs and to never be caught napping."

"That will do, major."

And, with a courtly and expansive bow, the Corpulent Mystery withdrew, leaving his experienced critics to tacitly acknowledge that he was about the hardest nut they had ever attempted to crack.

CHAPTER XVII.

MR. HARDMAN'S WRATH.

SOON after Rose Marling took her seat before her desk and typewriting-machine on the following morning, and before Mr. Hardman's arrival at the office, Horace Allen laid a freshly-received telegram before her.

It was dated at Montreal, late on the preceding evening, and was as follows:

"H. ALLEN:—Am here all safe and hunky. Regards to Rosey-Posey. R. M."

Rose mutely bowed her head, and then, at a significant sign from Horace as he returned to his desk, she crumpled the dispatch and threw it into the fire.

Disgusted as she might be at its vulgarity, she could not but be grateful for the information conveyed.

A few moments later Mr. Hardman arrived. He was in a stern mood that might at any moment burst out in more or less violent ill-humor; for in the newspaper accounts, which he had skimmed on his way down-town his own name was more than once incidentally mentioned.

However, in talking of the affair, which he at once began to do, he could not but compliment Miss Marling on her courage and his nephew upon the creditable part he had sustained therein.

But, understanding the altered situation as he now did, he also felt that Horace and Rose must by this time most likely be engaged, which made him feel uncomfortable; though a glance now and then at the suffering face of the beautiful girl, as she kept it industriously bowed over some copying, softened him more or less.

"It's the devil's own complication and sensation combined!" he exclaimed, at last. "And to think of that stupendous scoundrel outwitting them all and getting off scot-free. You are to be greatly commiserated, my dear girl, if the fellow is related to you."

"Not in the remotest degree, uncle!" Horace hastened to reply for Rose, stepping into the room from his desk. "You or any one might know that without asking."

And, very briefly, he set forth for his uncle's information the chief points in Miss Marling's past history.

"Humph!" grunted Mr. Hardman, who, though interested in what he heard, had all of a matter-of-fact commercial man's dislike for romance and mystery. "What has been done with the secret papers that seem to have

prompted that villain's cupidity in the first place?"

"They are here in your safe, uncle. I placed them there this morning."

"Well, well! Anything of my detective friend as yet?"

"Nothing yet, uncle."

"Gad! I trust he has been more successful in the first matter than in the last—though, of course, no one can hold him responsible in missing his chances with such a devil as that colossal scoundrel must be, I suppose. Good Lord! what an ordeal for even the most dare-devil of detectives to pass through! Tut, tut! But here is an extra big Monday's mail. Miss Marling, and we might as well get at the letters at once."

But scarcely had he begun to dictate, and Rose to start up the faithful clickity-click of her machine, before Walden, the detective, put in an appearance, when, with a more or less ill-humored growl on the part of the merchant, the work was discontinued.

He glanced at the new-comer inquiringly, but the latter merely shook his head, and then quietly took a seat.

A man who has recently been hurled from an Elevated Railroad train, all but scorched to death in an aerial tangle of electric wires, besides passing unscathed through scarcely inferior and rapidly-succeeding perils, is naturally an object of interest in any case, but the merchant was too full of his own dissatisfaction to long defer the discussion thereof.

"What! nothing yet?" he presently asked, it being understood that he referred to the fugitive Ralph.

"Nothing," was the reply.

"Then he can't have remained in the city, as you were so sure he would?"

"No, sir," moodily; "but it's through no fault of mine—nor of the youngster either for that matter."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean it is my impression I have been interfered with." And Walden glanced darkly at Miss Marling, whose back was toward him as she bent ostensibly over her resumed copying, and yet more resentfully at Horace, who had again stepped into the doorway from his desk in the outer office.

Mr. Hardman's brow began to blacken, but before he could explode or say anything, his nephew said, quietly:

"You might as well know it first as last, uncle. The young man is safe from pursuit in Canada, and through my advice and instrumentality. Miss Marling knew nothing of my action until after its object had been attained."

Then the merchant's wrath burst forth.

"What, with my money in his thieving possession!" he roared, becoming fairly purple. "You dare to tell me this, sir."

"He swore to me that he hadn't taken it, for that matter."

"He swear! Preposterous! You couldn't have believed it yourself."

"Perhaps not. One moment, my dear uncle."

He stepped back to his desk, and returned with a freshly-written check, which he placed before the exasperated old gentleman.

It was his own check for one thousand dollars.

"What's this?" gasped Hardman.

"The amount that was—missing out of the Express package. I choose to make it good to you in this way."

The merchant tore the check into small bits, and passionately scattered them.

"And I choose," he cried, springing to his feet and fairly dancing in his rage, "to have my money from the hand that stole it, and not from you, sir. Mr. Walden, attend upon me, if you please."

He precipitately quitted the office, with the detective at his heels.

Rose turned a white and frightened face toward Horace.

"Don't be alarmed," he said, reassuringly.

"It will be all right."

"But how? Why?" she stammered.

"You don't know my uncle as well as I do. His furies burn themselves out in short order; and so will this one."

"And then?"

"He will stand the loss himself, and call off this pursuit, at least as long as Ralph remains out of the country."

"Ah! but are you sure?"

"Quite."

"Then, oh, my friend, what do I not owe you? This last exhibition of your generosity, your nobleness—"

"Rose, not a word more in that strain! I only ask one thing of you, in return for what you may imagine I have done in your behalf."

"What is that, Horace?"

"To be allowed to still occupy the same house with you, to still watch over you till this darkness is made light, this mystery and misery dissipated."

A slow, dry sob rising and falling in her throat, she leaned her forehead on one hand, covering her eyes, and extended the other to him.

He respectfully raised it to his lips, and was gone back to his desk.

Horace had not been far out of the way as to his uncle's disposition.

After leading the detective to an upper and deserted floor of his warehouse, Mr. Hardman angrily paced it in silence for several minutes.

Then he surprised his companion by stopping short and turning to him, with a still troubled but no longer stormy face.

"There would be some difficulty in the way of extradition, and all that sort of thing, eh?" he asked.

"Yes, but not much."

"Then drop it."

"What, the pursuit?"

"This one, yes—save only if the boy should come back over the border. Drat the money! he'll go to the deuce soon enough with it, in all conscience. In the mean time, as to that mysterious scoundrel, Max Marling—"

"Yes?" eagerly.

"Hunt him down!—to the gallows or some other death, if possible, since it seems uncertain that prison bars could hold him. I'll make it worth your while, my boy."

"And I'll accept the trust!" in a deep, intense voice. "Still, sir, this sudden change of intention on your part?"

"The deuce! can't you understand, man? The beautiful girl down there will doubtless one day be my nephew's wife. Her scapegrace of a brother won't so much matter—few family flocks without their black sheep, anyway. But as for the stupendous incubus of this rolling mountain of rascality continuing to blacken the girl's name by sharing it, zounds! it must not be for longer than we can help."

"Trust me for that, sir!"

The detective's eyes glowed, his face becoming as of iron, his sinewy hands clinching convulsively.

He was then about taking his departure, when the merchant, who had grown more quietly thoughtful, signed him to a pause.

CHAPTER XVIII.

PREPARING FOR THE WAR-PATH.

"WHAT else is there, sir?" asked the detective.

"Only a reflection or two," replied Mr. Hardman. "This Corpulent Mystery is evidently a regiment of criminals in his single person, eh—intellectually, no less than physically?"

"I should say so."

"According to what Horace says, the man, in addition to his prodigious strength and activity, must wear a shirt-of-mail, or something of the sort."

"I haven't a doubt of it—when he is regularly on the war-path, so to speak. He, however, laughed at the charge when made against him at Headquarters, I understand, proving to the chief's satisfaction that then, at least, he was totally without any such concealed defense."

"Ah! and how about his supposed magnetic or mesmeric power, or whatever it may be called? You believe he possesses that, too?"

"How can I help believing it, in view of what happened to the coachman and myself? You must have read these busy-body accounts in today's papers?" And Walden slightly gritted his teeth.

"True, true! But how, then, can you hope to circumvent or entrap a villain so superlatively equipped?"

"I don't know—leave that to me. One can go on the war-path as well as another."

"Good enough—so you succeed. Now, there's one thing more in this connection, Mr. Walden."

"What is it?"

"Has my nephew told you anything of the mystery of Rose Marling's father's disappearance, as connected with that package of papers, which prompted this master villain's entrance into the young lady's rooms?"

"Yes; I know the whole story."

"Well, then, in running the villain down, why not have the discovery of that poor man's whereabouts also in view—that is, supposing him to be still alive?"

"I have already thought of that."

"But hold on!" uneasily. "It occurs to me that Horace said he had now secured those papers in my safe."

A sudden thought came to the detective.

"A good thing!" he said. "I hope you will let them remain there."

"The deuce! as a bait for another attempt to blow its doors off their hinges?"

"Yes, if need be. It would be a good ready-made trap."

"Ah! I begin to understand. So be it, then. But hereafter a night-watchman shall sleep in that little vacant room just off from my private office."

Here the interview terminated.

Half-an-hour later Walden was in secret conference with Inspector Byrnes.

"All right, then," said the inspector, when he had listened attentively to the detective's plans. "I rather think you have undertaken the tough job of your life, Walden, but I give you perfect freedom in the matter, though of course I shall expect a daily report of your progress."

A fortnight elapsed, however, without any fresh developments, or anything having been

effected, though the detective was by no means idle.

"It may seem that I'm rather slow, inspector," he said one evening at the end of this period. "But I've really come upon an important discovery at last."

"What is it?"

"Major Ludgate is the secret chief of the Silver Gang."

The Silver Gang was a powerful band or brotherhood of criminals, with headquarters in New York and ramifications extending far and wide. While its depredations were miscellaneous in character, it had made its first reputation and earned the name that clung to it still, by confining its operations chiefly to the plundering of wealthy houses of their silver plate and similar valuables, in most instances while the occupants were absent abroad or at the summer watering-places. Many of the Gang's members had been arrested and their individual conviction secured, but as an organization the band still remained undemolished, much to the secret chagrin of the authorities.

The inspector gave slight start, and then he meditatively pulled his great mustache.

"You are sure of this?" he asked.

"Quite sure. In fact, I'm quite positive of having discovered the place of their secret meetings."

"Where is it?"

"In the cellar of an abandoned house among the rocks in the vicinity of Spuyten Duyvil."

"What have you done so far?"

"Made Ludgate's acquaintance in the character of an Australian crook, besides making some progress into his confidence—I think."

"Humph! Take care that he isn't merely misleading you to think so."

"I've thought of that. But, as you know, my talent for characterizations and disguises has never failed me yet."

"True, but you've never met a Corpulent Mystery before, or any game to compare to him."

"I never lose sight of that."

"When is the next conclave?"

"Two nights hence, I think; but I shall make certain of it to-night."

"Go ahead!"

This interview was late in the afternoon of a cold, blustering day, with snow on the ground and more in the air.

At eleven o'clock of the ensuing night, Walden was proceeding on foot from an Elevated Railroad station to his home, in the neighborhood of Central Park, with the intention of assuming his chosen fictitious character in view of paying a fresh visit to "Major Ludgate."

While passing the Eighth avenue entrance to the Park, he thought he heard a faint cry from somewhere up one of the west drives.

It was not repeated, but he dashed off immediately in its direction, with a noiseless fleetness of foot for which he was noted, the ways being entirely deserted for the time being.

Arriving, unperceived, at a secluded portion of the drive, an impressive and unique spectacle met his eyes.

A coach was halted in the vicinity of a public lamp, around which the snowflakes were driving and eddying in the wild night-wind.

On the box sat the coachman as if petrified, staring straight forward over the backs of his tired steeds, one hand mechanically grasping the reins, the other as mechanically clutching the guard of his seat.

The door of the coach stood wide open. Before it, with his back turned toward the witness, stood an enormously bulky figure, slouch hatted and rough-clad, with one hand extended toward a young lady in the coach, who seemed to be under some sort of spell, while words, perhaps questions and answers, which the detective could not distinguish, were passing between them.

The young lady was Rose Marling. She had half started out of her seat as if in the act of springing out of the coach, but remained as if spellbound in this attitude, swaying uneasily from side to side, her face set, her eyes fixed like one in a trance on the man who thus strangely confronted her.

Lying in a confused and motionless heap on the opposite seat, very much as if suddenly overtaken by a cataleptic fit or struck by lightning, was a gentleman whom the secret witness likewise recognized as the young lady's escort, Horace Allen.

Of course, he had also recognized the mountainous figure at the door from the first.

What could it mean? The arch-villain at his mesmerizing diabolism again, as a matter of course.

But, after a single glance, which had comprehended the outlines of the situation, the detective did not pause to analyze it in detail.

Drawing his special short stick—not of the ordinary locust, but of *lignum vitae*, and of exceptional weight and toughness—he sprang noiselessly forward and brought it down with tremendous violence on the top of the big man's head.

There was a combined thud and ringing sound, as of the blow falling first on felt and then on metal—say on a cushioned steel cap under-

neath the outer head-wear. The blow bounded harmless in the air, and the owner of the uncrackable scone turned a beard-muffled face upon his assailant with the expression of a demon and the snarl of an infuriated wolf.

"You again?" he hissed. "However, my task is complete. Therefore continue to exist for the present."

There was a lightning-like, commanding gesture, and the detective reeled back as if before a puff of invisible flame.

When he recovered from the shock the man had disappeared, while the coachman and his fares were rousing themselves in a dazed and bewildered manner.

Walden stepped forward, and in a few words explained his presence.

"Now let me ride a short distance with you," he then observed. "I am bent on important business, and it is probably of vital importance that I should know just what happened."

The request was acceded to, and the story was soon told.

The young lady and gentleman were on their way home from one of the theaters. Soon after entering Central Park the carriage had come to a sudden halt. Then the massive stranger had appeared at the door, which he had unceremoniously opened. Horace had indignantly started to resent the intrusion, when, to use his own expression, there had been several lightning-passes of the intruder's hand before his face, after which he had become totally unconscious. Then Rose had found herself spell-bound by the same occult power, during which she was still conscious of having been asked several questions, and of obediently and truthfully answering them, without the least capacity for resistance. The man's object had been to discover whether or not it was now her custom to carry on her person the mysterious papers supposed to be connected with her father's disappearance.

This was about all. He had seemed satisfied that she did not have them in her possession.

"Allow me to ask one question," said the detective when the story had been told.

"What is it?" Rose inquired.

Did the scoundrel satisfy himself, by the same strange power, where the papers now are—that is, in Mr. Hardman's safe?

"I am afraid he did."

"All right. Then it is my advice that you let them remain there. I shall see you both again before long. Good-night." And Walden slipped out of the coach.

CHAPTER XIX.

A TICKLISH RISK.

TIME had been lost by the unfortunate episode, but not enough to hinder the settled intention the detective had had in view.

Hastening to his lodgings, he issued therefrom at about midnight, so completely transformed that it is safe to say his most intimate friend would not have suspected his concealed identity.

His mustache had spread out into straggling, bristling mutton-chop whiskers; his left eye seemed to be half-blinded by a disfiguring natural defect; his short, dark hair—by nature soft and silky—was coarse and bristling straight out all over his bullet head; even the general expression of his face had taken on a hang-dog, sinister aspect; and his loud, pretentious dress was puzzlingly suggestive alike of the low gambler, the sailor, the ticket-of-leave man, and perhaps the all-around b-a-a-d man or crook from remote foreign parts.

An individuality to be instinctively feared by honest men, no less than mystifying to spirits of his own seeming sort.

Nevertheless, on his way back down-town to once more undergo the critical examination of the Corpulent Mystery—for this would not be his first bid for that worthy's confidence in this elaborate transformation—he could not but feel less assurance in the ultimate success of his enterprise than heretofore.

In view of to-night's extraordinary proof of the arch-scoundrel's all but superhuman power, to say nothing of his own experience in the past, how could he reasonably hope, even by the exercise of the utmost patience, ingenuity and watchfulness, to circumvent or successfully antagonize such a paragon of evil?

However, his despondency was but of brief duration, and then his spirits rose with the very consciousness of the danger upon which he was entering.

If somewhat tarnished so far as his past reputation was concerned, his grip-and-hold-fast instinct was still intact in the matter of his inner man, and it was at last with complete restoration of his iron self-confidence that he descended from the Elevated station at the corner of Thirty-third street and Sixth avenue with the intention of once more facing the lion in his inmost den.

This den, however, was by no means the open bar-room in which he had first sought out the object of his attentions, nor anything like it, though it was in the same immediate neighborhood.

Walden sauntered down the avenue, and came to a pause before the closed doors of a large and showy saloon occupying the entire ground

floor of an old, three-story building, the rest of which—that is the part above the immediate saloon—was dingy and dilapidated.

Its proprietor was an ex-politician and notorious desperado and thieves' fence; its bartenders and waiters professional bouncers, pugilists and toughs.

The dazzling, crystallized sign-board stretching across the building bore the seductive legend, "The Paradise," and there were sufficient indications that a lively business of iniquity was still being done behind the closed doors and closely-lowered blue-curtained windows.

Entering at a narrow side passage, and knocking at a small door, the detective was admitted into the saloon by one of the waiters, after the exchange of a few muttered words.

The great saloon was filled with women and men, drinking at small tables, many of the former attractive and expensively dressed, many of the latter respectable-looking, but all guardedly carousing, so to speak, and the majority more or less under the influence of liquor.

A paradise in name, as it in hideous irony; a glittering hell in the omnipresent suggestiveness of its glitter and glare.

Pausing before the gorgeous bar, which was likewise crowded with cautious revelers, the disguised detective interrogated by a significant gesture a crop-headed brute, suggestive of a sort of humanized gorilla in fine clothes and jewelry, who loomed behind the bar like a boss-fiend among his crop-headed, white-aproned subordinates, and might have been the proprietor.

The man gave him a swift, searching look in response, then smiled, nodded, and indicated by a side-jerk of his head the remote rear of the building, or premises.

The detective forthwith proceeded through the saloon, made his exit by a small rear door, and, crossing a narrow, dimly-lighted paved yard, or court, whence another door in a rear building afforded him ingress into a close, strange smelling apartment whose characteristics would have been sufficiently familiar to the average New York man-about town or diligent newspaper reader.

He was in the Chinese department of The Paradise—in other words, a large opium joint—where numerous individuals were listlessly lying about the room, engaged in the seductive but pernicious pastime of "bitting the pipe."

Totally indifferent as to his new surroundings, the detective summarily beckoned to a tall, stoop-shouldered Chinaman, with a face like death in a yellow mask, and interrogated him by a sign, much as he had done the humanized gorilla of the bar-counter.

Grinning and kowtowing in response, the Chinaman led him to the head of a narrow staircase in a remote corner of the den, where an equally cadaverous-looking Celestial was on guard.

The latter, after the exchange of a few words in the tea-box dialect with his compatriot, forthwith conducted the detective down the stair and along a dimly-lighted passage to a deep-set, very strong-looking door, whose guardian was a powerful negro, of a particularly villainous and secretive cast of countenance, and who was armed with a tremendous billy, or policeman's locust club, of unusual proportions.

Upon the detective's nodding familiarly, and speaking a few words in an undertone, the negro opened the door by a single clever touch, and announced in a loud voice:

"Australian Bob!"

The door closing behind him as he entered, the detective found himself in a place that was not altogether new to him.

It was a large, comfortably-furnished apartment, and, considering that it was a cellar, fairly lighted and ventilated in the bargain.

A small bar, presided over by a mulatto, was in one corner, while several men were playing cards for money at a long table in the center of the room, while an idle looker-on of the game, in a seemingly disinterested way was present in the shape of the Corpulent Mystery himself.

As he looked up—immaculately dressed, clean-shaven, composed—with a genial smile for the new-comer, it was difficult to believe that he was identical with the ill-kempt ruffian of the mesmerizing episode of scarcely an hour previous.

"Ah, Bob, sit here beside me," he said, making room at the smaller table from which he was watching the game. "Well," as the disguised detective sauntered up, "perhaps you are by this time prepared to prove that you are worthy of being one of us?"

"I think so, major," was the diffident reply.

"What have you got?"

For answer the pretended crook from the Antipodes drew from his pocket an expensive gold watch and chain, a diamond pin and diamond ring, and complacently laid them on the table.

CHAPTER XX.

IN THE LION'S DEN.

THE master-villain's eyes listened at the display of the jewelry, and picking it up, piece by piece, he began to examine it attentively.

"First-class!" was his hearty comment, after a moment's inspection. "The ticker is a beauty, the jangler matches it, and either one of those sparks is worth a cool hundred at any respectable fence."

"So I thought," replied the pretended Antipodean, jealously keeping his better eye on the articles—for the gamblers, though not wholly discontinuing their pastime, had shown themselves animatedly aware of the glittering heap and what was going on at the smaller table. "I generally make sure of my man before giving him the sand-bag."

"Oho!" said the Mystery, with added but still smiling interest; "a laying-out case, eh?"

"Bob" nodded.

"How was it?"

"Over on the east side, two hours ago, and that way," was the indifferent reply, accompanied by the production of a new variety of that dreaded criminal weapon, the sand-club.

"Ludgate" put on his glasses for a better look, and the adjoining game was forthwith relinquished while its participants crowded around the little table to curiously examine the interesting object, which had been carelessly tossed in the middle alongside of the jewelry.

It was about as long as the police regulation short-stick, and twice as thick, so cleverly painted as to seem to be made of wood. But it was in reality an elongated, slender sack crammed tightly with sand, which furnished both the stiffening and the weight—a terrible weapon, whose blow might be as deadly as soundless, and perhaps likewise without leaving a telltale abrasion or bruise!

"It's a daisy!" observed "Ludgate," admiringly. "The skin of it seems to be of thick silk, instead of canvas."

"Australian Bob" nodded.

"Is that a Melbourne?"

Another nod, and then the novitiate forthwith whisked the weapon, together with the jewelry, out of sight.

Ludgate frowned a little, while his subordinates scowled.

"You're too fly," suggested the former. "The swag should go into our common fund."

"Not much!" with an oath. "There ain't no common fund for me as yet. If I were one of your League, as I've told you I want to be, it might be different."

The minor villains—there were half a dozen of them—scowled yet more threateningly, but "Ludgate," whose face had resumed its plump benignity, so to speak, said that it was all right, and sent them back to their game.

The detective's possession and utilization of the objects exhibited may be briefly explained.

They had been taken from a foreign robber, who had been nabbed by the police while still bending over his victim in the neighborhood of Headquarters but a few hours previous, and had been borrowed by the detective from the property-clerk for the misleading object they had just been put to.

"How long are you from over the water, Bob?" asked the master-criminal, suavely.

"Two weeks," was the reply.

"What's your last name?"

"What you please."

Ludgate smiled and nodded.

"You'll do!" he said, decidedly.

"Ha!" cried "Bob," with immense satisfaction. "You mean it, boss?"

"Yes. You've already received intimation as to the place?"

"You hinted of it yourself."

"Well, the conclave is for Thursday night, an hour before midnight. Be there, and you'll be initiated."

"Good! good!" cried "Australian Bob," with a look of profound satisfaction deepening the sinister characteristics of his evil face. "I'll be one of you, and so no longer on my own hook—which, to tell the truth, isn't so seductive for a knock in a new land."

Ludgate bestirred himself, with an appearance of new and fatherly interest in his new protégé.

"Wouldn't you like to join our friends in yonder game, my son?" he softly inquired.

"It's whisky-poker?"

A nod.

"Yes, then—if you're not in it."

Ludgate burst into a fat, velvety laugh, which was hoarsely echoed by the card-players, who seemed to think this an excellently cut at their chief.

"All right!" and the latter good-humoredly nodded again while lighting a fresh cigar. "Go ahead, my boy."

Vastly elated, to all appearances, Australian Bob treated the crowd and then sat down to the game.

He was a card-manipulator, in comparison with which the skill of his fellow-players seemed little more than rudimentary.

In less than half an hour he had quietly pocketed all the money there was among his companions—thirty or forty dollars.

Then, in spite of their growls and murmurings, he rose to go.

"Shan't I need a password or something of the sort, boss, up the river there?" he asked.

"No," replied the chief. "Simply show up at the house. You'll be attended to."

"All right."

"Where do you hang out?"

"When I'm one of you, you'll know, not before."

"Good enough!" approvingly. "Don't forget that you are still on probation till then."

"I ain't likely to forget that."

"Have you spotted the down-town store I set you on as a trial task?"

"Yes."

"What have you done?"

"Only chummed in with one of the porters, so far."

"Nothing yet as to a pile being on hand?"

"Nothing; but I may have a good word for you by Thursday night."

"Good-night!"

"Good-night!"

"Hold on, freshy!" cried one of the main losers in the late game. "Ain't you going to set 'em up again afore you twist out?"

"Yes—after you have salted yourself a year or two."

This cheap sally evoked another laugh, and the detective forthwith withdrew.

After quitting the entire premises, he swiftly doubled a sharp corner, and then, making sure that he was not being dogged, he made a beeline to report at Headquarters, according to orders.

But the shrewdest of men may still be dogged by the stealthiness of expert crime.

While passing through the worst and loneliest part of West Bleeker street, twenty minutes later, he was suddenly set upon by two armed ruffians, who sprung upon him from different sides, and absolutely without warning.

The disguised detective did not utter a cry or a word, but, producing a knife as if by magic, proceeded to defend himself with such tremendous energy and activity that in less than a dozen seconds one man was stretched dead, the other one dying, on the ground.

He then coolly hurried on, cautiously reported the case to a roundsman whom he met on his beat, and, reassuring himself afresh that he was not being dogged, at last made his way to Inspector Byrnes, and gave in his report.

"All well," commented the inspector, "with the single exception of this street adventure, which has an ugly look."

"Granted," replied the detective.

"Do you fancy these two assailants may have followed you down from the Paradise?"

"I can't say, inspector," was the quiet reply. "But I must take my chances as to that."

CHAPTER XXI.

PIPE-LAYING.

WITH the resumption of his own proper character on the following morning, Walden's first move was to make a call upon Mr. Hardman at his office, and have a private interview with him.

"To-day is Wednesday," observed the detective. "To-morrow, after banking hours, you will receive a package of twenty thousand dollars by the American Express, which you will be compelled to keep all night in your safe, just as happened once before."

"The deuce I will!" exclaimed the astonished merchant.

A grave nod in response.

"But I am expecting nothing of the sort, my dear sir," cried Hardman.

"It will reach you, nevertheless; and you must manifest both impatience and alarm in putting it in your safe, perforce, for the night."

"But I tell you," irritably, "there's no such money due me, nor half as much, that can come to me in that way."

"This will come. You'd better also make a show of having it counted over before locking it up, just as in the first instance."

"Ah, indeed!"

Walden smiled.

"Package and contents will be bogus," he explained. "It is merely to come and be locked up as a bait."

"Oho!"

"Just so."

"But look here, I don't relish having my office wrecked by burglars' experiments again, young man!"

"It can't be helped; or rather we shall be able to trap our men before a fresh explosion can occur."

"You anticipate capturing this Max Marling by the trap you contemplate?"

"Yes."

"What is to prevent his mesmerizing a whole posse? Horace has told me of that Central Park affair last night. Good Lord! the man must be the devil himself in disguise."

"Not quite so bad as that."

"Well, mighty near it. I'm beginning to grow afraid of my own shadow."

"You must brace up, my dear sir."

"Humph!"

"Is it in yonder little room that your private watchman sleeps?"

"Yes, a big bulldog along with him."

"Good! Who and of what stuff is the man?"

"It's Mike, my biggest Irish porter, whom

you must have remarked—strong as an ox and brave as steel."

"Good! armed, of course?"

"With a blackthorn stick, knobbed with a round root-chunk as big as a cannon-ball. Mike could stave in the side of a house with it."

"Still, there are certain skulls even better protected than the side of a house. I had a fair, swinging crack at the Corpulent Mystery's in the Park last night, and it only seemed to waken him up."

"Ah; and his infernal hypnotism, or whatever you may call it, to boot! I doubt if the whole police force can capture and hold that chap."

"Well, a small section in my own person will keep on trying, at all events."

"Go it! you have my sympathy, if nothing else."

"Isn't your watchman also provided with a fire-arm?"

"For what purpose? I doubt if he would know the muzzle from the butt."

"Very good, then. I must now be going. Shall see you again between now and to-morrow night."

This conversation had been a confidential one in a further corner of the inner office, where Rose Marling was busily at work; and it had struck the detective that there was a new anxiety in the bowed pose of the lovely head and the saddened softness of the exquisite face.

Then, on his way through the outer office, there was also something in the bookkeeper's air suggestive to his quick apprehension that the recent growing cordiality between the young man and the fair typewriter had suffered something of a change.

Horace looked up eagerly, and signed to him in passing.

Walden nodded, and then paused at the rail, where the young man stepped to his side so as to be out of sight from the inner office.

"I say, Walden," whispered Horace, in some uneasiness, "do try to lunch with me to-day! I want your advice on—on something very important to me."

The detective nodded, place and hour were given, and he took his departure.

"A lover's quarrel, doubtless," he thought. "What a pity the young fellow hasn't better looks to support his sterling qualities! The girl is so superlatively attractive in her own person that I fear she is not for him. With half a show, she could have her pick of the best-looking millionaires in the world."

At the lunch that ensued Horace Allen, though not a little embarrassed, lost no time in disburdening his mind of its trouble.

"Walden," said he, "I want you to help me out of a mystery in such off moments as you can spare. Miss Marling is suddenly changed toward me, and for no reason that I can possibly think of."

"All right," replied the obliging detective. "Since when?"

"Since our return home from our last night's remarkable adventure."

"Suppose you give me a particular or two."

"All of them, if you wish. You know the circumstances of my taking possession of that furnished flat in the same house containing hers?"

"Certainly; and very creditable to yourself."

"Thanks. Well, since then I have been welcomed as a friendly visitor in her little parlor—perhaps her sole friend or acquaintance admitted to such a privilege."

"Yes."

"I have at the same time been not unmindful of the conventions. It was at my advice that she secured a middle-aged, discreet and worthy woman as her friend, housekeeper and companion. This was on the second day after that terrible night. This woman is with her still."

"What is her sort?"

"A very respectable woman, I should judge by the little I have seen of her, and something after Rose's—Miss Marling's own kind. That is, for the most part extremely reticent and disposed to keep her own and her young companion's counsel. I understand she was, or her husband was, Miss Marling's father's friend in their Virginia days. Her name is Mrs. Spotswood."

"Ah, you have mentioned her to me before. But I thought this was a well-to-do widow lady, residing in Richmond."

"The same, but very recently overtaken by pecuniary misfortune, it would seem."

"Still, an opportune good thing for the young lady, I should say, to have gained such a discreet and valuable house-companion."

"I perfectly agree with you."

"What have you to complain of, then, permit me to ask?"

"Nothing, perhaps in reason," replied Horace, discontentedly. "And yet—Well, this is just what has come about. You are perhaps aware," with a flush, "that I am deeply in love with Miss Marling."

"Of course; who wouldn't be if he could? Nothing to blush for in that, Mr. Allen."

"Thanks—thank you very much, Walden."

Well, look here; I was really beginning to feel encouraged. Nearly every evening we had music or agreeable converse in her little parlor, at times in Mrs. Spotswood's presence, but quite as frequently alone. I have neglected my club entirely; at times she would vouchsafe to dine with me at Morello's or Martinelli's, or I would join them at their own table; and last night was not the first that I had persuaded Miss Marling to accompany me to the theater. Perhaps you understand?"

"Perfectly. No more elaboration on that point needed."

"Ah! Well, soon after our return from last night's trying adventure, it occurred to me to just run up from my own apartments to Miss Marling's before going to bed, and inquire if she was feeling a little less uneasy. That terrible experience, you see, had tried her nerves more than you could have guessed. Indeed, though she managed to bear up while you were in the coach with us, after that there was a reaction. She was painfully excited, and I feared at times she was about to faint."

"Yes?"

"Well, Mrs. Spotswood at first came to the door, looking very much disturbed, and saying that Miss Marling could not see me. I feared that Miss Marling had become seriously ill, and began to ask questions, when she herself came to the door. She was very pale but quite composed—unnaturally so, I have thought since. She told me coldly, though with lowered eyes, that she preferred I would not call any more. I pressed her for reasons for her charged demeanor, but she persistently refused to assign any; leaving me to infer, I think, that our growing intimacy might have aroused unpleasant comment on the part of the other tenants. But I am satisfied there was something behind all this. This morning, on my meeting her in the office—for I mostly go to my uncle's house for my breakfasts—she was polite, but with a coldness yet more marked. There you are, Mr. Walden."

"It mayn't signify as much as you imagine," suggested the detective, finishing his lunch—which he had not neglected while listening to his companion's troubles—and lighting a proffered cigar. "Women are so unaccountably capricious at times, you know."

"Yes, yes; but don't you agree that there is most likely some hidden mystery behind all this?"

"Yes," after a brief pause.

"Can't you then," anxiously, "give me a clew to it out of your experience?"

"Not just yet. You see I have had more to do with men than women—especially young and handsome women. But I will think it over, and see what I can do for you."

"That's a good fellow!" and Horace already looked somewhat relieved. "You see, notwithstanding that I shall keep my quarters in the same building, to be near Miss Marling in case of further danger threatening her, I would naturally not think of playing the spy upon her."

Wirt Walden laughed.

"I see," he observed. "Anything that would be beneath you couldn't possibly be beneath me—a poor devil of a detective!"

Horace flushed up.

"That is hardly fair, Walden," he replied. "Nothing so invidious occurred to me, on my honor. I only thought it—"

"In the line of my profession?"

"Yes, then."

"So it is," good-naturedly. "No offense was meant or is taken. Make your mind easy, Mr. Allen; I will manage this minor mystery for you as early as possible."

They then separated.

CHAPTER XXII.

A SIDE ISSUE.

BUT Horace Allen's story of Rose Marling's change of demeanor had aroused the detective's curiosity much more than he had chosen to let appear.

"I begin to suspect there is something behind it," he said to himself on his way to Headquarters. "And, unless I am very much mistaken, that something is the Corpulent Mystery's concealed hand in one form or another."

Having reported to his chief, he hastened to his lodgings and resumed his Australian character several hours sooner than he would otherwise have done, resolving that it might be able to perform double duty.

It was still but the middle of the afternoon (it now being cool crisp weather, following upon the recent Indian summer season) when he again emerged in the unenviable character of Australian Bob, but with this addition, that he now carried a long, rather bulky bundle carefully done up in oilskin.

It will be remembered that, among other things, this disguise suggested something of the seafarer.

In this bundle he carried a number of East India shawls, which had come into his possession some months previous, and it was now his intention to make an investigation of the alleged minor mystery in Miss Marling's flat in the guise of a sailor-peddler, or bogus contrabandist,

after which the disguise, as originally conceived, would answer for yet another interview with the Corpulent Mystery.

Entering the house under consideration, he first won the indulgence of the janitor and his family by a small present of bandanna handkerchiefs, alleged to have been smuggled, and then proceeded to visit flat after flat, beginning with the lowest down, for the naturalness of the thing.

He met with small pecuniary success, but, as he hadn't expected any, this didn't trouble him in the least.

At last reaching the topmost floor, he was about to essay the suite across the main hall from the one occupied by Rose, leaving the latter till the very last, when a well-remembered voice in the private hallway connected with the opposite apartments caused him to slip out of sight into an opportune doorway in short order.

It was the voice of "Major Ludgate" himself.

Soft and persuasive, it seemed to be begging for admission into the apartments, while the voice in response thereto—a womanly but very firm voice—seemed to be just as persistent in its refusal of his desire.

At last the major's huge figure appeared, stepping, or rather backing, out into the main hall, in a somewhat discomfited way, partly followed by a more than elderly woman, of very striking physiognomy, who, still opposing him, stood grimly framed in the private-hall doorway, resolute antagonism presented by every line of her strong face and ample figure.

"But really, ma'm," continued the would-be intruder, with renewed suavity, "this is very extraordinary treatment for an old friend, I may almost say a blood relative, of Miss Marling's family."

"You can't come in," was the sharp and laconic response.

"But you must also remember me as an old acquaintance of your lamented husband, Judge Spotswood."

"Should say I did," contemptuously. "You can't come in."

"Miss Rose," with dignity, "will like enough be seriously offended when she comes to learn of my uncivil treatment at your hands."

"Will she?" derisively. "You can't come in."

"I'm her Uncle Max," somewhat irritably at last. "I was a favorite with her and her brother when they were little more than children."

"You can't come in."

"But I just want to observe the view from the corner windows. Am thinking of taking and furnishing a flat myself, you see."

"You can't come in."

Even the Corpulent Mystery's invincible good-nature was beginning to give way to impatience.

"Look you, ma'm!" he said, with sudden sternness, "perhaps with a single airy pass of my hand I could rivet you to where you stand, and enter those apartments in spite of you."

"Try it on! You can't come in."

Doubtless, the woman presented one of the rare instances of a temperament totally unimpressible to his dreaded mesmeric power.

At all events, he made no attempt to exert it, but contented himself with an angry gesture.

"Pshaw!" he exclaimed. "An Amazonian guardian you make, truly, Mrs. Spotswood, over just nothing at all!"

"A good-enough one to take care of you, Max Marling, and don't you forget it! You can't come in."

"Can't I? Preposterous! If I were of a mind to insist on it, you would soon see."

The woman's fearless eyes flashed.

"You would dare to threaten me, eh?" she snapped. "Wait a minute, then."

Backing suddenly away, she slammed the door shut in his face.

The major stood irresolute, candlering his expensive fob-chain with his fat white hand, a sinister scowl on his lips, now that he was, or imagined himself to be, uncheerful.

Then the door suddenly flew open again, the woman reappeared, and an extraordinary fire-arm was thrust, muzzle foremost, into his face with such promptness as to cause him to fall back a step or two in unmitigated astonishment.

It was an antiquated, but apparently still serviceable flint-lock blunderbuss such as is seldom or never seen nowadays outside of an antiquarian's collection.

Its staring, bell-mouthed muzzle, however, was sufficiently formidable; its short, enormously-thick rusty barrel might have swallowed half a pound of gunpowder and a full pint of bullets at a charge; and, moreover, it was seen to be cocked and primed.

In fact, it was more like a young field-piece than anything else.

Mrs. Spotswood promptly brought the weapon to her shoulder and drew a bead upon the astounded adventurer.

"My grandfather's great-grandfather fit the James River Indians with this thing in 1640," she calmly remarked. "And, as I chanced to clean and load it less than a fortnight ago, I know there's good stuff in the old gun yet. Now,

then, Rapsallion, Robber Max Marling, come on!"

"Come, the deuce!" growled the adventurer; and, with a shrug of his mighty shoulders, he incontinently beat a retreat, descending the stairs in no little haste with his contradictorily light and active step.

Then Mrs. Spotswood, with a slight smile on her grimly-determined face, quietly lowered her weapon and withdrew.

Walden waited until quite certain that the master-scoundrel would not return, and then, stepping out into the hall, thought the situation over.

What could this side issue, or minor mystery, mean?

As he had foreseen, the dreaded major was already on the scent of and doubtless deeply interested in it, but was it likely that he suspected more of the truth than himself?

Rose, with the help of her able companion, was most probably keeping some one concealed in her apartments. This seemed all but morally certain, and would sufficiently account for her sudden coldness toward Horace Allen in sheer self-defense.

Then, by turns, the thought of the young girl's fugitive brother and her missing father flashed into the detective's mind in the order named.

Which, if either, could it most likely be? Ralph, doubtless; but then the major's eager suspicions would be less readily aroused in that supposition than in any other; for the boy could be of little use to him, whereas a mere hint of the dead come to light in the person of Rose's wronged father, and presumably his, Max's, victim, would scarcely fail to sound an alarm in the depths of the villain's consciousness, howsoever self-reliant and desperate he might be.

At all events, he, the detective, must make the attempt to discover at all hazards what the formidable major had obviously thus far failed in doing.

Therefore, after waiting a reasonable length of time, and with no fear of the blunderbus on his own part, Walden first assured himself that the private hall-door could not be fastened by reason of an imperfection of the lock, and then rapped for admittance.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A MERE GLIMPSE.

As the woman appeared in response to his summons, the detective was struck afresh by the firm strength of character in her aspect, which was not without a certain sweetness and benignity, in spite of the uncompromising suggestiveness that was its most prominent feature.

But he at once burst volubly in the support of the character he was assuming.

"Here you are, ma'am!" he cried, forthwith displaying the contents of his package. "Real Indian shawls what I can sell you for next to nothing, for I'm a sailor and I smuggles 'em—dy'e see, ma'am. Aint they charmers? There they are!" shaking out a really attractive shawl in artistic folds over his arm. "What dy'e say to this one, ma'am? Just sold two like it on the second floor. Only six dollars!"

The woman had been observing the villainous countenance of his make-up with slow and grave distrust.

But, though she answered him decidedly, it was with none of the cold and defiant scorn with which the Corpulent Mystery, for all his gentlemanliness and suavity, had been rebuffed.

"Friend," she replied, calmly, "I neither require nor wish any of your wares."

"Not at six dollars, ma'am?" in apparent amazement.

"Not at any price, sir."

"But think of it, missus! The Custom-House duties would make that beauty of a wrap cost fifteen dollars in a store, and only as I smuggles 'em in, bein' only a poor devil of a sailor—"

"I refuse to think of it, friend," still calmly. "Neither am I so dishonest as to assist in cheating my Government out of its lawful customs-dues."

"At least, examine this one, ma'am," he persisted, shaking out a yet handsomer shawl. "Haf deny it if you can, ma'am, if there's a prettier bunting for a hang-up craft like yourself to sail under on a frosty day. Say four dollars, and it is yours."

The good woman was captured at last, for the shawl was really a bargain worth treble the money, or more.

"I will take that one," she said, after a brief examination. "Wait here a minute without stirring"—with a parting distrustful glance—"and I will fetch you the price."

She then entered the rooms by the parlor door, (with which the detective was somewhat familiar, as will be remembered,) locking it behind her.

The pretended smuggler was left standing part the way in the private hall.

He had only time, however, to cast a longing glance at the door, besides noting that it had a faint light which was partly open, when Mrs. Spotswood returned.

"Thankee, ma'am!" he said, with the conven-

tional scrape of the foot and jerk of the forelock, as he received the money. "Might there be even a younger lady than yourself in your family?"

"Yes, there is," she replied, sharply, only partly disarmed by the excessiveness of the compliment conveyed. "But she isn't at home. Why do you ask that?" with fresh suspicion.

"Lord love your good looks, ma'am. Why, maybe I might sell another shawl to her. That's why I axed yer, ma'am."

"She'll not think of buying one. And look you, young man, be mighty careful that you don't call here again!"

With that she almost thrust him out into the main passage and shut the door in his face.

The pretended smuggler imperturbably trotted out a little sea-song in a pleasant voice, and lost no time in descending the stairs in a somewhat demonstrative manner.

He even carried his prudence so far as to quit the house entirely and pass completely out of sight down the avenue, against the chance of his movements being watched from above.

In ten minutes, however, he had retraced his steps, with the exercise of a due amount of caution, and was once more in the upper main hall.

Softly entering the private hall, he listened intently till quite certain that he heard the woman stirring about in the back room, which was the kitchen.

He then forthwith glided to the parlor door and noiselessly tried it, but only to find it secured, as he had anticipated.

Then, being a trained gymnast, he stealthily did what the Corpulent Mystery, for all his unparalleled muscularity and its associative activity, could never have done.

He stood his bundle on end against the door, put his foot on top of its yielding but still appreciable support, and, grasping the upper edge of a jamb with either hand, drew himself straight up by sheer muscular effort and looked in through the tilted transom-light.

What he gained was a mere glimpse, but it was sufficient to fill him with astonishment and satisfaction.

Then he let himself down, too exhausted for a repetition of the feat.

Through the open door of the bedroom that had been occupied by Rose Marling's scrape-grace of a brother the figure of a man was lying, but in such an attitude that nothing but the back of his head, covered with silvery white hair, had been visible, together with a thin white band—the wasted band of a confirmed invalid worn out with privation and illness, no doubt—listlessly thrown out over the drapery of the couch.

This was what that fleeting glimpse had comprehended, and for the detective, in his then overstrung condition, it was enough.

"By Jupiter!" was his mental exclamation, as he picked up his pack and stole away; "no wonder that the major is disturbed in his mind, and still less that Rose Marling is jealously guarding her new mystery from her lover himself. Her long-lost father is back under her daughterly protection, or I am a numbskull! But how, when, in what manner? The Lord only knows!"

From Harlem the detective returned to his own lodgings, where he left his bundle—the one shawl disposed of to Mrs. Spotswood was all he had sold out of it, though the pack might be presently useful again; after which he ate his supper, and then strolled on the West Side for an early-evening paying of his respects to the master-villain.

He sought him in the same open bar-room, in which he had effected his arrest three weeks previously, this being the major's favorite loitering-place till later on.

The Mystery was there at his select little table, bland and benevolent-appearing, cigar in mouth, eye-glasses over his nose, the accustomed glass at his elbow, his newspapers before him.

But, in reaching him, the pretended Australian crook had to run the usual gantlet in the neighborhood at the door, where he was surprised at the deadly and furious glances and scowls evoked by his presence, in spite of the effectiveness of his characterization.

"What does it mean?" he coolly demanded of Ludgate, upon taking a seat at the latter's table, where he was permitted to remain in comparative isolation.

The major smiled deprecatingly, and shrugged his shoulders.

"Can't you guess?" he asked.

"No."

"Your Number Two of last night, or early this morning is dead."

"Ah!" still more coolly; "it's that Bleeker street affair that is sticking in these fellows' crops."

"Why shouldn't it?"

"Can you ask me that question, even you?" angrily. "Curse them! do they fancy I'm going to stand being robbed by one of my own kind without raising a hand, or drawing a stickler, in my own defense?"

"What! did they try to go through you?"

"A pretty question!" with an oath. "And

look you, boss, if I thought those two were of your gang—"

He came to an ominous pause.

CHAPTER XXIV.

MAKING A RECORD.

THE master-scoundrel had suddenly riveted his supposed recruit from the Antipodes with a startled look, as the latter broke off suddenly from completing the sentence.

"Well, young man," said he, still gently, "go on with what you were about to say."

"You can bet your life I will!" was the pseudo-crook's prompt response, accompanied by a threatening gleam of his one unimpaired eye. "It was just this: If I thought the two hounds whom I sent to kingdom come last night were from your gang, or they had tracked me at your instance, curse you! I'd get even with the whole raft of you if it cost me my neck. There you are!"

The major at once broke into an approving smile, and he forthwith extended his hand.

"Put it there!" he exclaimed, in a low but hearty voice. "You'll do, Australian Bob!"

"I'll take care of myself, if that's what you mean," with a seemingly reluctant acceptance of the proffered hand-clasp.

"It is what I mean," earnestly. "You have been tested, and found to be of the true stuff, though it cost the Brotherhood two good men to prove it."

"A test, eh?"

"Yes."

"Then my assailants were of your gang?" still savagely.

"Yes; though, of course, without my knowing their intention. It was a chance test, so to speak."

"Make it more plain, then!"

"They tracked you from the den underneath the joint. The display of that loot, especially the sparklers, had been too much for them."

"Like enough! But a crook doesn't try to do one of his sort on the other side of the world where I came from."

"Neither should they on this side of it. But you ought to rest content. You are tenfold higher in my estimation than you were before."

"Thanks!" dryly. "But how is it with your rank and file? Those chaps about the door yonder looked as if they wanted to eat me up as I passed through 'em coming in here."

"Naturally enough, because, apart from certain faults, the brace of men you knifed were good ones. But I'll make that all right."

"As you please," indifferently.

There was another shrug of the great shoulders, and then the major scribbled something with a pencil on the blank margin of his newspaper, which he tore off.

Then calling to him one of the near-at-hand ruffianly loungers, he tossed him the slip with a significant look and gesture.

The fellow disappeared with the slip of writing.

A few minutes later the men who had glowered so menacingly at the pseudo-Australian on his entrance sauntered past the little table with smiles and approving looks.

"Now they understand you better," observed the major, genially, "and you are all right with them."

"I don't care whether I am or not!" with another oath.

"Come, come! let it go. You're not one of the gang yet, you must remember; besides, you shouldn't complain, since you dished the pair of 'em."

"All right, then," with a clearing face. "But I want no more of this nonsense in the future."

"Make yourself easy."

"Thanks; but I haven't been uneasy yet."

"Tut, tut! By the way, friend, what did you do with that pretty bit of swag you had?"

"Cashed it in, as a matter of course. The tickets are in my pocket."

"Cashed it already, eh?" with a slight frown.

"That's what I said, major."

"You might have turned the stuff into the common fund."

"And, again, I mightn't. You seem to forget that I'm not one of the gang yet."

"True, true!" with a laugh. "You've rather got me there, old fellow. But you shall be one of us to-morrow night."

"That is what I'm looking for."

"Now as to business—though it isn't my custom to talk shop in such a public place."

"Oh, get a mental move on you! You want to know if there's anything new with regard to the Harman business?"

"That's it! that's it!"

"I haven't been idle."

"What have you got?"

"Another Express-package is expected to-morrow."

"Aha!" And the major began to rub his hands softly. "Where from, my boy, and the amount—the amount?"

"From somewhere in South America—Rio or Buenos Ayres, I am not certain which."

"So; but the amount?"

"Twenty thousand dollars, or their equivalent in Spanish-American money."

"Excellent! excellent!"

"Yes, if this package arrives, as the first did, after bank hours."

"We'll trust that it may, my boy, we'll trust that it may! Same Express as before?"

"Yes, the American."

"When shall you make certain as to the arrival?"

"Some time to-morrow. Will bring the news up the river to you at the rendezvous you have appointed for my initiation."

"Good, good! Let me see: your friend down yonder is one of the porters?"

"Yes; a strong little man, Denis by name. He overheard the proprietor discussing the expected package with his bookkeeper."

"Any more porters there?"

"One other, a stunning Irishman whom they call Mike, and afraid of nothing. He now sleeps back of the office as a guard."

"Ah! the deuce he does."

"And a rousing bull-dog with him. It is the new order of things; so in any event, you'll have to be cautious."

"Oh, that will be fixed!" half-contemptuously. "Porters and bull dogs are of small account with me. By the way," with a keen glance, "have you been struck with any other feature of interest in connection with the warehouse office?"

"You refer to the pretty typewriter, of course?"

"Exactly."

"Well, she's still there. Fact is, I caught a glimpse of her once, and she's a beauty. But what has the young lady to do with this affair?"

The Mystery was looking at him intently, as if debating whether to trust him in some new and vitally important matter or not.

"With this affair, nothing," he answered, slowly and impressively. "But—this is between you and me exclusively—I chance to be deeply interested in that young lady, my friend."

"What man wouldn't be?" with an evil leer.

"The girl's as handsome as a house afire."

"You misunderstand me. It is not in the young lady's beauty that I am at all interested, exceptional as that may be."

"Oh!" incredulously.

"It is the truth. There is something in connection with the young lady, a mystery, which I may some day ask your help in solving—some day when I know you better."

"Which will be soon, I think."

"So do I. Shall you look in at the den later on?"

"Not to-night."

And, with a parting nod, the disguised detective took himself off.

"By Jupiter! I must be making real headway with the scoundrel," he said to himself. "And what would he not give to know what I know with regard to Miss Marling's private mystery?—that is for a certainty, for of course he must have a suspicion of the truth. However, let me take nothing for granted as to this man's real thoughts or impressions."

The detective this time took the precaution to return guardedly to his home, and discard his disguise, before making his report to his chief.

"You seem to be getting on swimmingly, Walden," commented Inspector Byrnes, after listening to the report—in which, by the way, his subordinate had made no allusion to the side issue, as concerning Miss Marling's private complication. "But don't be off your guard an instant. Ludgate may be still misleading you—may have seen through your work from the very first."

"I am aware of that, inspector," was the quiet rejoinder, "and I shan't be caught napping again, if I can help it. But I really think I've a right to be confident that I am getting on with the man."

"It looks that way. Shall you attend the up-river rendezvous to-morrow night?"

"As a matter of course."

"And shall you manage to have the next attempt made on the Hardman safe directly thereafter?"

"That will depend, though I think so. It will be according to how solid I find myself with the gang."

"Williams would ask nothing better than to be on hand down at the warehouse, with a squad or single-handed."

"Doubtless, but I can't be certain of anything as yet. Though of course, I'll arrange to have a blue-coat or two on the alert in that vicinity."

"What is the hour for your up-river rendezvous?"

"Eleven o'clock."

"That will do for this evening, Walden."

CHAPTER XXV.

A LOVER'S ANXIETIES.

It was still but nine o'clock in the evening when the detective had finished his report.

He was just stepping out of the Headquarters building when he all but ran into the arms of Horace Allen, who was proceeding thither.

"Well met! for I was hoping against hope to find you here," cried the young man. "Are you on your way up-town?"

"Yes, and to seek my bed," was the reply.

"Am feeling somewhat fagged, and haven't had a seven-hour, straight-ahead sleep for a week."

"Do you mind my walking with you a bit?—that is if you are thinking of footing it."

"Just my intention. Come along, Mr. Allen."

"Have—have you found out anything about my little affair?" Horace blurted out like a school-boy before they had covered a dozen rods.

"Well, I've an additional idea or two, but can't think of giving it away as yet. Nothing like a certainty, you know."

Allen's face fell.

"You couldn't even give me an inkling of it, eh?"

"No; it wouldn't be fair either to the young lady or yourself in case I should be wrong."

"Ah!"

"I'll assure you of this, though, Mr. Allen," continued the detective, kindly. "You can make yourself perfectly easy. The young lady has had no occasion whatever to change her sentiments with regard to you, whatever just cause she may have for keeping you at a distance for the present."

"Well, well, that is better than nothing, anyway," said Horace, brightening up a little.

"But," sadly again, "I was hoping so much that Rose—or Miss Marling, I should say—might let up on me just a little by now or to-morrow, if only temporarily, for that matter."

"May I ask why?"

"Certainly—I wish to tell you. Have you forgotten that to-morrow is Thanksgiving Day?"

"No, though I hadn't given it much thought. But what of that?"

"Well, my uncle is a New Englander by birth; and he has always, notwithstanding his being an old bachelor, observed the day by the customary dinner."

"Yes?"

"It will be quite a grand, old-fashioned time at his house. Mrs. Oatman, his cousin and housekeeper, has been busy with the preparations, of course; and there will be many family connections and friends, chiefly unmarried, present from a considerable distance round about the city."

"Yes?"

"Well, Uncle Jonas would really like me to bring Rose (Miss Marling) with me as one of his guests."

"I understand. Does she decline to go, then?"

"I don't know, but I am afraid she will. At all events, she simply bowed and thanked me, without saying whether she would or not, when I placed the written invitation in her hands this evening."

"Is it a midday feast?" Walden suddenly asked, after a brief pause.

"Yes," replied the young man, in some surprise. "That is the old-fashioned custom; and my uncle rigidly adheres to it."

"Do just as I tell you, then. Seek your furnished flat at once, and send up a beseeching message for Miss Marling to speak with you in the main hall below. It won't be over-late when you reach there, and I think she will comply with the request. Then simply beg that she will accompany you to the Thanksgiving dinner, while carefully abstaining from the slightest allusion to her strange exclusiveness. Or let her understand by your manner that you intend to thoroughly and uncomplainingly respect her reasons therefor, without the least attempt to divine what they may be until she sees fit to divulge them without any solicitation on your part. There you are, Mr. Allen."

Horace was both surprised and gratified.

"You lay it down like a handbook of etiquette!" he exclaimed.

"Oh, no; but rather like one of common sense."

"And you really think this will bring her around?"

"From what I judge of her womanliness, yes; unless, of course, she might have the southern antipathy to Puritan customs, when she will doubtless be frank enough to tell you so."

"By Jove! Walden, I'll try it on, anyway. Good-night, and thank you a thousand times."

And, with a hearty grasp of the hand, Horace hurried off for the nearest East Side Elevated Station.

Next morning, while Walden was making his toilet after an unusually protracted and undisturbed night's rest, Horace called upon him in high spirits to announce that the experiment had been successful, and Miss Marling would accompany him to the Thanksgiving dinner.

"You see, it doesn't pay to be borrowing trouble before it comes," said the detective, smiling.

"You should say," cried the young man, gayly, "that it does pay to ask and follow the advice of a sympathetic friend and capital good fellow, such as you have proved yourself, old man!"

"Fiddlesticks! You found, though, I was right, eh?—that the young lady appreciated your delicate respect for her mystery, whatever it is?"

"Yes, yes," with a fleeting diminution of his gaiety. "Well, never mind the mystery; it

will be all explained in her own good time, I suppose."

"Of course it will. As to another thing, Allen, while I think of it."

"What is that?"

"As to that money Express-package from Buenos Ayres, that Mr. Hardman told me he was expecting? You won't be compelled to keep a large sum over-night in your safe again, I trust?"

"Speak lower, my boy. It came last night—after banking hours, just as the other did—and is in our safe now!"

"The deuce!" said Walden, though really gratified at what he heard.

"But it's all right," continued Horace, "for I am only now from a visit to our office. Besides, Mike will not quit the building, for all its being a legal holiday."

"Still, after your former experience, wouldn't it have been better to insist on the Express Company retaining the package on their own responsibility till to-morrow morning?"

"I suggested as much to my uncle; but you know what sudden caprices he can take. Only yesterday, it seems, there was a newspaper account of a Western Express-office safe being cleaned out by burglars, and it had left its impression on his mind. Besides, he doubted if the company would be content to assume the continued responsibility, though I assured him it would be obligatory for them to do, in my opinion. However, he would have none of it. 'Lightning never strikes twice in the same place,' he growled, 'and neither do safe-breaking attempts, or mighty seldom. Besides, my big safe has defied the devils once, and it should be able to do so again, in case of need. Besides, there's big Mike at hand, with his blackthorn, to say nothing of the bulldog.' So there the money is, you see, and safe enough still, though uncounted, and with the seals of the package as yet unbroken. And the best of it is that, barring yourself, no one but my uncle and I can have the faintest suspicion of its presence in the safe."

"Ah, well," replied the detective, reassuringly, "those are unusual safeguards at all events."

Then the talk was changed to other subjects, after which Horace went away as light-hearted as he had come.

Late in the afternoon of the same day, the detective, after resuming his Australian character, was seized with an impulse to make another visit to Miss Marling's home.

There was time at his disposal, he could have as his excuse a chance to dispose of another shawl, and he was desirous of verifying if possible the short and surprising glimpse into Rose's mystery which had been vouchsafed him on the preceding day.

On his again announcing himself by a smart rap on the outer door, Rose answered the summons in person, very nicely attired, as if she might have been back from the Thanksgiving dinner but a short time.

She had evidently learned of his previous visit with decided disapproval, for she viewed him and his smuggling pretensions with uncompromising severity.

"I shan't want a shawl, sir," she said, peremptorily. "You must not come here any more. I just won't have it. Excuse my peremptoriness, but I am engaged, and cannot be disturbed."

She therefore coolly motioned him away, and shut the door in his face.

CHAPTER XXVI.

"TWO CAN PLAY AT MASQUERADING."

As the door closed, there was the snap of a spring-lock—evidently placed upon it since the preceding day—and the disguised detective was left staring at it blankly.

"The deuce!" he muttered; "the young lady doesn't need any blunderbuss, if the old one does. I must take a spell at watching the house for possible developments."

And he forthwith decamped.

As Rose Marling reentered her little parlor, Mrs. Spotswood, who was knitting by the fire, looked up with an approving smile, for the latter had overheard what had passed.

"You can dispose of such persons better than I, my dear," she admitted, in a low voice.

"Is he asleep?" whispered Rose, indicating the closed door of the bedroom adjoining her own.

The older woman nodded.

"Sit by the window, then," continued Miss Marling, "and let me know where that man goes, after quitting this building."

As the other complied, she noiselessly stepped into the chamber alluded to, from which she quickly emerged with numerous articles of clothing rolled up under her arm.

"The man has gone into the oyster saloon," reported Mrs. Spotswood, "on the other side of the street, half a block down."

"Very well; keep on the watch, please."

And then Rose disappeared into her own room.

"Is he still there?" she asked, upon reappearing, ten minutes later.

"Yes," replied Mrs. Spotswood, still faithful at her post of observation.

"Then pray remember, my friend, that not even a door is to be unlocked during my absence. And you are not to be uneasy, no matter how long I may be delayed."

Absent? delayed? The older woman looked up in surprise, and then gave an exclamation of amazement.

The transformation that had been wrought in Rose's aspect was a sufficient challenge for remark.

It was no longer as a beautiful young woman, but as a very handsome young man, that she now stood before her old friend.

A becoming autumn suit, which Ralph had purchased just previous to his evanishment, had been utilized to advantage. She was of about the same height as he, besides being ampler and nobler proportioned in every way, and the costume fitted her to a charm; her hair being, moreover, so cunningly done up under the natty Derby hat as to give no indication of its femininity of abundance; while, better than all, she bore off the character with a fearlessness and absence of self-consciousness that would have done credit to a professional actress in that line. Even the masculine mustache had not been forgotten, a delicate, silky black line of the hirsute appendage just shading the short upper lip.

Though the relict of a Virginia judge, Mrs. Spotswood was a very old-fashioned sort of woman.

"Bless my stars and garters!" she exclaimed, throwing up her hands, after adjusting her spectacles; "what can it all mean?"

"What can it mean?" echoed Rose, with her soft contralto laugh. "Why, that two can play at masquerading, no less than one. You remember our counterfeit presentments in the old days, that were so entertaining to my poor father? Well, the practice I had then shall stand me in good stead now. That shawl-smuggler was some spy in disguise, I am satisfied of it; and I am going to find out who he was and what it meant. By-by, Auntie Spotswood! and don't forget my injunctions as to the doors."

She kissed her friend's forehead, cast a parting glance full of tender solicitude at the closed chamber door, and, snatching up a whalebone walking-stick as a finish to her equipment, was gone in a flash.

There was a rear first-floor connection between the building and the adjoining one, with which she was familiar.

Taking advantage of this, she quickly emerged upon the street from the latter, and marched directly toward the oyster saloon which had been indicated.

The pretended smuggler was still there, dawdling over a "fry" at the table nearest the glass-doored entrance; whence he could keep up his watch upon the building in which he was so deeply interested.

She passed him without attracting his attention, and seated herself at a table a little further back.

Here she called for a stew, and picking up a newspaper, devoted herself to furtively studying her man, with even greater intentness than he was watching the place of her residence.

The stew was slowly disposed of and another one ordered—Rose was fortunately blessed with the excellent appetite that comes of superabundant youth and unimpaired health—without her observation relaxing in its intensity.

Her suspicion that the man was not what he pretended to be had speedily been confirmed, though she could not quite suspect that he was other than he seemed in the abstract—the detective's make-up was too much for her in that respect.

That is, she did not doubt that he was the sinister-appearing rogue that he so successfully aped, but was only convinced that his peddler-smuggler part had been nothing more than a cunning device for gaining access into her rooms, and consequently into the heart of her secret which she was so intent on guarding.

Now her chief anxiety and determination was to discover whether or not his prying was inspired by her arch-enemy, Max Marling, whose visit of the preceding day, as reported by Mrs. Spotswood, had filled her with impotent fury and nameless alarm.

Her secret—her new mystery! Heavens! what would become of it if that superlative villain, either through his own subtle contriving, or such on the part of one or another of his criminal subordinates, should penetrate its nature?

However, the darkness of the chill autumnal evening came on without the disguised young woman being a whit the wiser, and then the pretended Australian wearied on his own part of his futile watch.

She had already paid for her oysters, and was in close pursuit as he settled his reckoning and went away.

By reason of its being a holiday the streets were more than ordinarily thronged, which facilitated her task of keeping the man in view with but little risk of attracting his attention.

How different it would have been could she have divined that this new man, this supposed enemy, whom she was tracking so relent-

lessly, was, in reality, her well-wisher and friend, even now bent on perilous service in which her own best interests were more or less directly involved.

How different, yes, but how unfortunate notwithstanding, as the event will ultimately demonstrate! for, had she thus suspected the truth, she would have doubtless given up his pursuit on the spot, which would have been his ruin, perhaps his destruction.

But let us not anticipate.

Instead of seeking a down-bound Elevated train, as Rose had expected, her fugitive led her a foot-chase down the avenue to 125th street, and then due west along that thoroughfare.

CHAPTER XXVII.

DISGUISE AGAINST DISGUISE.

It was baffling and disappointing work for the disguised young woman, however, that long and rambling chase which the disguised detective (disguise against disguise), led her from point to point of the great up-town Harlem district, and without for a moment suspicious of being thus dogged on his own part.

This may seem strangely inconsistent in one of his profession, but a little reflection will serve to show why it was not so in this particular instance.

In the first place, inasmuch as he knew he was looked for at the Spuyten Duyvil rendezvous, he had no occasion to apprehend any immediate dogging on the part of the Silver Gang.

In the next place, his confidence in the security of his disguise was such that he was quite certain of escaping a like espionage by reason of his true professional character which was thus effectually concealed; and in fact, so numerous were his enemies among the criminal classes in the abstract, he would probably have been naturally more on the alert in his true character than now.

And then again, Walden was unusually absorbed in his own thoughts, both in view of his recent disappointment and of the serious peril he was presently to confront; and was, moreover, just now chiefly intent on idling away the time up to the hour when he should set out for the appointed rendezvous.

He played a game of billiards in one place, viewed a small street fight in another, dropped into a concert saloon at yet another, visited various bar-rooms (apparently more for the purpose of observing their inmates than for anything else, for he drank next to nothing while laying down his money for the glass that was scarcely tasted), and so on.

And still shadowing him, patient, alert, discreet, never for a moment betraying her purpose, there ever followed on his track the handsome girl-youth, notwithstanding the many an inward shrinking that it caused her, and still hoping that the pursuit would at last develop something definite and satisfactory.

And the worst of it for Rose, or at least the most tantalizing part of it, was that her fugitive was constantly growing more and more enigmatic, instead of the reverse.

Here was a man, by countenance and deduction, a villain, and yet a stranger in the great city—to all appearances, absolutely without an acquaintance or a friend. A haunter of liquor saloons, and yet practically a teetotaler. Doubtless, a human bird of prey of one sort or another, and yet a being of abstracted moods and reveries. In all probability a pretender, a fraud, a shunner of the light, and yet careless who followed or what attention he might attract.

Was ever such a puzzling enigma of a man before?

Rose began to despair, no less than to weary.

At last, however, when the night had grown seriously late, and she was thinking of giving up her adventure as a "questless search," as Tennyson calls it, the man suddenly hailed a cab at the bustling corner of Eighth avenue and 125th street, muttered some words to the driver, and, springing into it, was driven rapidly away.

There were other public vehicles looking out for a job there, and Rose Marling's determination to see the thing out was taken in an instant.

She approached a close coach, behind what appeared to be a pair of serviceable horses.

"You noted that cab that has just driven away?" she demanded of the driver.

"The one as the seedy gent just climbed into? Yes, sir."

"Keep it constantly in sight, without betraying your object. I shall pay you fairly for your trouble."

With that, she leaped into the coach, the door was slammed to, there was a crack of the driver's whip, and the pursuit was once more in progress.

We must now follow the fortunes of our disguised detective directly.

Unsuspecting of any pursuit, he remained quietly in the cab, which turned directly northward at the Eleventh avenue crossing.

Then followed a long and lonely drive along the boulevard and country road continuations, and over the noble ridge of river-fronting land that is doubtless destined to be a residential

paradise of wealthy and care-free New York in the not very distant future, and which has already long been the site of many a rich man's villa, while the locality is rapidly thickening with a more or less opulent or well-to-do population.

There still remain, however, many a lonely stretch of rock and woodland, solitary and forbidding enough as the night deepens.

On and on they went, by Manhattanville, by Carmansville, by Inwood, and then on and up through the lonelier and more desolate stretches of the Kingsbridge Road, along the wooded and still lofty tongue of land by which Manhattan Island reaches up to the narrow Harlem River outlet into the lordly Hudson that is known as Spuyten Duyvil.

At this point, Walden, for the first time since starting, leaned forward and spoke to the cabman.

"Go more slowly," he said, "and be on the lookout for a large old mansion that seems to be entirely deserted on the left."

The man nodded and complied, there being starlight but no moon.

At last he came to a halt, saying:

"There you are, sir! Is that the place?"

His passenger alighted, looked at the house—almost the only one in sight, and standing far back from the street in the midst of large grounds that had doubtless once been attractively ornamental, but were now lost in neglect and decay—and answered in the affirmative.

"Wait for my return in this spot exactly one hour," he ordered, authoritatively. "If I am not back in that time, drive in all haste to the police station at Inwood and tell the officer in charge there just what has happened so far as you know. Here!"

He pressed a ten-dollar bill in the man's hand, turned, and, without another word, walked directly toward the house.

The cabman was no stranger to his employer for this night, and was a man to be thoroughly trusted.

The pretended sole instructions with regard to this rendezvous had been merely to approach the house and then to wait.

He accordingly ascended the steps of the dilapidated piazza, and then stood in its shadow expectant.

There was presently the rumble and roar of a passing railroad train down on the river's margin below the bluff, and after that the rustic solitude of the isolated grounds were unbroken by any sound, save the mournful sighing of the wind through the leafless trees by which the abandoned house was surrounded.

All was neglect, desolation, desertion, and the weird solemnity of the night.

Presently, however, a door was heard to open behind, and a voice was heard to say, in a hoarse whisper:

"Any one there?"

"Yes," replied the detective, turning toward the door, which, however, he could but dimly see.

"Name?"

"Australian Bob."

"Come in."

As he approached the door, a hand seized hold of his and pulled him into the pitch-dark interior.

Then there seemed to be some little hitch about reclosing the door, though it was finally accomplished, when the unseen guide exclaimed, angrily:

"What the deuce! Was any one with or following you?"

"On my honor, no!" was the response; "or not to my knowledge."

"All right; though the door seemed to stick against something. Come on."

The detective boldly followed the sound of his guide's footsteps in the darkness.

Then there appeared a light from down below, showing a staircase, and for the first time he had a dim view of his guide's outline as they began to descend it.

The light was more distinct below, in what was probably the basement floor of the house, and then as they continued to advance they came upon the lamp that afforded it, standing at the top of steps leading down into the cellar.

Here, as the guide turned to examine his face, the detective perceived that his, the guide's, face was closely masked.

"No mistake," grunted the latter. "Glad of that! Come along."

They descended into the cellar, and thence along a vaulted passage that seemed to extend far out underground toward the face of the bluff.

They paused where it ended at a strong, deep-set door, against which the guide, who had caught up a lighted lantern at the foot of the cellar stairs, beat a peculiar sort of rattattoo with a short stick he carried.

The door was opened, and they were suddenly in a large underground apartment, brightly lighted by torches, and suggesting the conventional smugglers' cave of old melodramas, where a number of unmasked men, the Corpulent Mystery among them, sat around a long table, drinking beer and smoking pipes, as if in calm expectancy of the novice's visit.

"Ludgate" rose smilingly, and grasped the pretended Australian's hand.
 "Comrade," he cried, heartily, "the Silver Gang welcomes you as one of themselves!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE SILVER GANG.

THE rest of the gang—many of whom the detective recognized as well-known thieves, desperadoes and members of the swell mob—then rose from the table, crying out formally, "Welcome to the Silver Gang!"

The Australian was then given a seat among them and the right hand of their chief, while the glasses were filled by a negro from a near-at-hand keg, a pipe and tobacco were placed at his disposal, and conversation began to circulate, for the most part in thieves' Latin.

The new-comer had taken in his surroundings at a glance.

The underground apartment impressed him with having but recently been stored with stolen goods in great amount, some remnants of which were still remaining in the shape of silver and other expensive ware.

Another deep-set door at the further end suggested that it might open somewhere out on the face of the river bluff.

This impression was presently confirmed by the sound of a passing train on the Hudson River Railroad, which could be distinctly heard.

"Ludgate" slapped the "Australian" familiarly on the shoulder.

"Well, my little man," he cried, genially, "what do you think of us, now that you are one of us?"

"I like it," was the answer; "but look here, major, am I really already one of you, and with no more ceremony than this?"

"Why not? Ha, ha, ha! We never run the risk of betrayal, do we, my boys?" There was a fierce roar of assent from the assembled villains. "Not we! We are too wide-awake and circumspect for that. However, you'll be put to an informal test presently, my boy."

"Whenever you please," replied the novice, recklessly. "Frankly, I like this sort of thing, and I am glad to be with you."

He then engaged in a familiar talk with the dreaded chief, in the course of which the latter grew very affable and communicative.

"You seem to have had a clearing-out here but recently?" observed the new-comer.

"Yes," was the reply. "Four times a year we have our 'finds' shipped off to our regular fences. But we soon fill up again."

"Who are your fences?"

"You'll find out soon enough, old fellow," good-humoredly. "Don't be too inquisitive before your time."

"I don't mean to be that."

"Of course you don't. It's all right. How did you reach the house?"

The detective explained the circumstances of his long ride in the cab, which was still in waiting.

"You might have saved yourself all that," observed the chief. "A railroad ticket to Inwood, and then a brief tramp along the ridge, would have fetched you here in half the time."

"But this is the first time you've told me so, and you must remember that I am still a comparative stranger in New York."

"True, I had forgotten. Well, old fellow," with a peculiar smile, that somehow made the detective vaguely uncomfortable, "now that we've got you, trust us to hold you fast. We're mighty fond of our friends."

There was a summons on the river facing door, which was promptly opened.

Four men entered, bearing a large and heavy hamper, which, on being set down, partly burst open, so that part of its contents, silver and gold plate, fell out on the ground.

The fresh "find" was duly examined by the robbers, and from their conversation the detective learned that the wares were the proceeds of a robbery just successfully perpetrated on a country-house from the other side of the river.

When the seats at the table had been resumed, Ludgate suddenly, but still genially, turned upon the novice, saying:

"Now is your turn, Australian. What of the Hardman job we have under contemplation?"

"All is ready for you," was the prompt reply.

"When will the job be ripe?"

"It is ripe now."

"You are sure?"

"Perfectly."

"What more do you know?"

"This: the South American Express package came last evening after bank hours, and is still in the safe."

The chief turned to an elderly and taciturn-looking scoundrel whom the detective did not remember to have ever met before.

"How's that, Stickers?" he demanded. "Do you confirm this news that Australian brings us?"

"Perfectly," was the quiet response. "He has got it down fine."

"What else do you know?" And the chief turned again to the detective.

"Only this: that to-night is the time to crack the safe, if at all. But you must see this better than I. Of course the package won't be kept waiting for you after the banks open."

"Good enough! What does the swag amount to, Bob?"

"Twenty thousand dollars, in paper money of the Argentine Republic, easily negotiable."

"What are the safeguards to contend against in the warehouse, Mr. Australian?"

"A big Irishman and an English bull-dog."

"Are you quite sure of all this, Mr. Wirt Walden, *Holdfast Detective of the Central Bureau*?" in a voice of thunder.

Astounded as he was, the detective instantly sprang to his feet, his revolver flashing in his hand.

But there was but one shot from it, which struck the vaulted ceiling as his arm was knocked up, and then he was swept off his feet, overpowered, and his facial make-up torn off in a twinkling.

Apart from the supreme peril of his position, the detective's reflections were bitter and humiliating beyond expression.

So the master-villain had penetrated his disguise, doubtless from the very first, and this was the end of all he had so conscientiously and painstakingly striven for!

It was simply terrible.

The robbers roared around him like so many wolves, their teeth gnashing, their weapons flashing in the torchlight.

"Stand back!" peremptorily ordered the chief.

"Let me look at him."

As they reluctantly obeyed, he stood over the unmasked and prostrate man, his face wreathed with an expression of unrelieved diabolism.

"So!" he exclaimed. "This is another peg into your *holdfast* reputation, I suppose; and you really thought to deceive me?"

Doomed beyond remedy as he believed himself to be, Walden had nevertheless, the hardihood to laugh in his face.

"Better than that," he replied, dauntlessly, "I really hoped to hang you."

Ludgate stamped his foot, but controlled his fury by an effort.

"Away with him!" he cried. "To the garret of the old house with him, and then fire it in fifty places. The crib is played out as a rendezvous, anyway, and we shall be safe enough in our deep retreat here. Away with him!"

The detective laughed scornfully, as a dozen pairs of fierce hands eagerly gripped him.

"Demon!" he exclaimed; "you triumph in this, the main issue, but I have what you have been unable to obtain—Rose Marling's new secret!"

The blow told.

"You lie!" cried the master-scoundrel, suddenly changing countenance.

"It is God's truth! the man whom she has been so devotedly keeping concealed—" he purposely paused.

"Go on!" roared the chief, in an agony of suspense to which he was doubtless little accustomed.

"Well, he is beyond your reach by this time," with a triumphant sneer; "safe under police guard at Headquarters."

This, of course, was false, being oppositely concocted for the young woman's future protection.

"Still, the concealed man?" cried the master-villain, hoarsely.

"One before whose testimony you well may tremble!"

"It is the boy, Ralph; no other!"

"Not he!"

"Who then?"

"The dead-alive—Henry Marling, your whilom victim!"

The villain staggered back.

"False, false!" he murmured. "It cannot, must not be!"

"It is true. I have seen him!"

Though still pale and disturbed, Ludgate had regained something of his self-possession.

"Curses!" he exclaimed. "Whatever betides me, you shall not witness my downfall, dog of a detective-spy! Away with him!"

Gagged and bound hand and foot, the detective was forthwith hustled out of the cellar, and up into the attic of the old mansion, one of the scoundrels leading the way with a torch.

There he was cast upon the floor, and hurriedly abandoned to his fate, after the torch had been stuck into the wall to keep him company.

"Hurry up!" he heard one of the villains say as they were descending the stairs. "We can make our escape from the den by the river-door. See; they've already begun to fire-up down below."

Ten minutes, or less, after being thus abandoned, a flame shot up in front of the dormer window by which he had been cast, smoke began to creep into the great barnlike attic, and he also felt the place growing uncomfortably warm.

"Good God!" muttered the detective, behind his gag; "their threat is being made good with a vengeance. I am to be roasted alive, and no mistake!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

HOTTER and hotter grew the room, thicker the smoke, fiercer and higher the flames that leaped up outside the windows, and, save for the crackling of the latter, the silence of the place was simply a torture in itself.

Oh, if he could only burst one strand of his cruel bonds or even cry out! but it was impossible.

Hotter and hotter, brighter and brighter, more stifling and yet more stifling! and now the rushing, roaring flames seemed to be fairly encircling the house in their red and yellow embrace.

The devoted detective could only writhe on the floor, which seemed to be scorching him to the very bone, and give himself up for lost.

Then there was a cry from somewhere below—a cry of hope and encouragement.

"Hold on for a minute longer!" called the voice. "C'ming, coming!"

Then a noise of swift, light feet leaping up the reeling, heat-warped stair, and a graceful, youthful figure sprang into the flame-girt attic.

Of course, it was the disguised Rose Marling.

With two or three lightning-like sweeps of a small knife that she held open in her hand the prostrate man was free and ungagged.

"Quick!" she cried, helping him to his feet. "Not a minute is to be lost. Follow me!"

She dashed away down the stairs, the rescued man at her heels.

Even at the lower story the house was wholly wreathed with flames, save at one side, where there was a door open.

Through this they darted, and were then safe, though they had hardly attained the outer air, under the trees, before there was a sort of explosive roar, followed by a crash behind them.

They turned.

The interior, no less than the exterior, of the house was a roaring vortex of devouring fire, and the staircases and floors were crumbling and falling away into the red-hot gulf of the cellars.

The detective's cabman was seen hastening toward the scene in a sort of panic.

The stipulated one hour had by no means elapsed, and up to the first appearance of the conflagration, only a few minutes before, he had remained faithful to his post.

Thus far, not a word had been exchanged by the detective and his handsome young rescuer, whose sex was not so much as suspected.

But the latter, upon perceiving the cabman's approach, turned abruptly to hurry away, when the other clutched her by the shoulder.

"Hold!" he exclaimed. "God knows what I must owe to you, young man, but you still shall not escape me without revealing who and what you are!"

The disguised girl hesitated an instant, and then, turning, suddenly bared her head, with its high-packed masses of black hair, in the brilliant light of the blazing edifice, without a word.

It was the great sensational amazement of Walden's eventful career.

"Heavens and earth!" he exclaimed; "Rose Marling?"

"Yes," she vouchsafed to answer, half contemptuously, half bitterly. "You, Walden, did not hesitate to basely seek my secret under disguise; in return, I, likewise in disguise, deign to make you a present of your life. Do not venture to follow me—I command it!"

With that, she strode swiftly away just as the cabman came up, and was soon lost to view, for the detective did not attempt to follow her.

"Good Lord!" exclaimed the cabman; "what an escape you've had! I came running over as soon as I could quiet and secure my horse. Who was the young chap that led the way for you out of that fire?"

"Never mind!" replied Walden; "but come back to your cab quickly."

And the two together hastened off in the direction of the road.

"We're not observed, are we?" demanded the detective, as they reached their destination.

"You don't see any one else about, do you?"

"Not a soul, sir, though, of course, it won't be many minutes before such a rousing fire will fetch along a crowd."

The detective threw himself into the cab with a great sigh of relief.

"Down-town!" he exclaimed; "and as fast as your horse can tear. If he gives out, we must secure another."

"Yes, sir. Where to?"

"Elevated Station, 125th street and Third avenue."

"The station it is, sir!"

There was a crack of the whip, and the equipage sped away to the southward.

Groups of people were presently met here and there, all hurrying in the direction of the fire, but not the least pause was made.

They also presently passed a hackney coach going south, but the detective paid little attention, though rightly conjecturing that Rose Marling might be its inmate.

Thoroughly satisfied that the robbers could

not be aware of his escape from the frightful doom designed for him, but would have lost no time in setting on foot the fresh attempt upon Mr. Hardman's safe, he could think of nothing but getting upon the scene before them, for the springing of the trap in the devising of which he had exercised so much thought and ingenuity.

Then a second thought struck him, as to an error he might be committing.

"Change your course!" he called out to the driver. "Drive to 155th street and Eighth avenue. If I can catch a down-train, it may save me half an hour."

"All right, sir! Time enough yet."

The cab-horse was dripping and staggering when they reached the last-mentioned station; but still it was reached, and a down-train was just on the point of pulling out.

"Headquarters to-morrow!" called out the detective, as he leaped from the vehicle and made a bolt for the train. "Will make it all right with you there."

He got on the train.

It was well on to one o'clock when the detective got off at the West Side Rector street station.

No cab or coach was in sight, and he forthwith set off on a run straight across the island on the line of Wall street.

Reaching the South-street front of the warehouse, the adjoining thoroughfare being wholly deserted, everything looked undisturbed and peaceful.

But nothing was to be taken for granted.

Satisfied that he had reached his destination without attracting attention, he stepped back into the shadow of one of the entrances, whence he presently descried a watchful figure take up a stand at the corner of the alleyway by which the rear of the offices could be reached.

It was the lookout of the cracksmen, who were doubtless already at work on the rear iron shutters, if indeed they might not already have effected an entrance—of this he was now morally certain.

Partly recovered from his hot cross-town sprint, Walden drew a long breath of satisfaction, and his sinews seemed to thrill like tense-drawn steel wires in a singing breeze.

The rats were nibbling at the bait; a little patience, and the trap should be sprung.

He crept up on the outlook like a shadow, doorway by doorway, as if he was stalking Indians or wild deer in the forest.

His opportunity at last!

He sprang like a tiger upon him from behind with a throttling grasp, that not only shut off the fellow's wind, but brought him silently down on the rough stones with a terrific fall.

Then a blow of the fist completed the man's unconsciousness, his body was dragged away, and a moment later the detective occupied his lookout post, wearing the fellow's frieze great-coat and greasy cap, besides being armed with the long heavy bludgeon which he had carried.

Then the detective looked eagerly across the street, making a slight but significant snapping of his finger and thumb as he did so.

There was in response just a glimmer of brass buttons from under the shadow of a clipper ship's prow, thrusting its bowsprit high over the street, and that was all.

All right!

Then the sham lookout glided back into the dismal alley.

CHAPTER XXX.

SPRINGING THE TRAP.

At the corner of a cross-alley two hundred feet back, the entire rear of the warehouse was dimly in view in the pale light that found its way down into the well-like area.

A shutter had already been forced off and an entrance effected, one man standing on guard under the wind.

"Hullo, Sam!" called out this man, in a hoarse whisper; "why ain't you on the lookout where the major placed you?"

So the master-criminal himself was doubtless among those already in the building? Happy news!

"Oh, it's all right!" growled the detective, in response, changing his voice as well as he could. "Coast clear—not a soul to be seen. Are the rest of 'em inside at work?"

A curt affirmative was the reply, though the man had given a sudden start.

As the detective silently turned to retrace his steps, a slight sound caused him to wheel again.

The window-guard was skulking after him, suspicious distrust in his straining eyes, a long knife already gripped for an emergency in his right hand.

The detective smashed him between the eyes a staggering blow, and then, being unable to use his bludgeon at once, closed with him in a flash before a warning outcry could be uttered.

He managed to writhe away from a desperate lunge that was made at him.

The next instant, by a great effort of wrestling skill, he had torn the dagger out of his adversary's grasp, and driven it home into his heart.

The man went down like a stone, and so much as a gasp.

The body was quickly disposed of, and the de-

tective slipped back to the river-front, club in hand.

In response to another thumb-and-finger signal, our policemen came to his side from the opposite side of the water-front.

One tall cloaked figure remained withdrawn into the deep shadow of the clipper's prow.

"Who is that?" demanded the detective, in a low voice.

"A captain or inspector, but I don't know which," replied the roundsman addressed. "He gave us the password you had arranged for us, but would not mention his name."

"Ah! I think I understand. Quick, now! the burglars are already at work, perhaps half-a-dozen of them. Here is the key to the front entrance. You three—Jamison, Haight, Collins—will enter by that means and rush to the rear at my signal, which will be three shots in rapid succession. And you, Jackson, will stand on guard here at the alley entrance."

"What, Walden?" exclaimed Jamison, the roundsman; "you won't attack 'em in the rear single-handed?"

"Just that precisely."

Here there was something like the yelp of a dog from somewhere in the interior of the warehouse, and this was followed by what might be a hoarse, half-stifled shout or cry.

"Quick! to your posts!" hissed the detective; "they may be murdering the watchman already."

They separated, he darting back into the alley again, in his hand a spare self-cocking revolver of which the conspirators had failed to deprive him in the up river adventure.

Swiftly and silently he gained the window that had been forced, and peered within.

The sight he beheld might well have appalled but a little less fearless man than himself.

Two masked experts were already at work on the door of the safe; the dead body of Mike the watchman lay still quivering at the feet of his murderer, "Ludgate," his shillelah at one side of him, snapped in two, his bulldog at the other, brained by the same sledge-hammer, in the hands of the robber-chief, that had crushed in the skull of its master; while there seemed to be at least a dozen more villains, also masked, disposed as guards about different portions of the office.

The Corpulent Mystery himself—if indeed such he were—was roughly clad and disguised by the bushy, face-muffling beard which had distinguished him in his previous criminal attempts; and he looked even more bulky, mountainous and formidable in this character than ever before.

All this at a single glance, and without himself, the detective, being as yet perceived.

The next instant he had cleared the window at a leap.

An unerring shot from his self-cocker right and left, while he was yet on the wing, so to speak, brought death to the brace of guards disposed at either side of the casement, while a third—fired full at "Ludgate," though of course without effect, doubtless by reason of the latter's concealed armor—completed the signal agreed upon with the policemen in front of the building.

Then, before the subordinate scoundrels could quite recover from their astonishment, Walden was upon the robber-chief like an avalanche, the muzzle of his revolver thrust into the latter's throat.

Before he could pull trigger, however, he had been hurled back by one of the masked men; and was then fighting for his life in a desperate hand-to-hand conflict with a knot of them.

Luckily for the detective, the robber chief had dropped his hammer, and staggered back, with starting eyeballs, as if suddenly confronted by a vision of the dead.

"Wirt Walden alive?" he muttered, wildly; "Wirt Walden alive? Impossible! for then must the devouring flames yield up their prey."

Speedily recovering from this momentary helplessness, however, the massive scoundrel again caught up his hammer.

"Kill him!" he roared, rushing toward the spot where the beset detective was already scarcely holding his own against his knot of assailants. "Make no mistake this time—kill, kill kill!"

But he was once more deterred at this juncture, and by two unforeseen interruptions.

In the first place, there was a premature gunpowder explosion before the door of the safe (where the two criminal experts had scarcely ceased their burzlarious experiments for more than an instant) that shook the building to its center, and by which they were hurled staggering back with blackened faces and writhing limbs.

And, in the second place, a small group of ruffians suddenly came flying back into the office from the front of the store before the rushing charge of the three policemen, who had by this time effected an entrance there in response to the detective's signal.

Pop! pop! rung out the revolvers of the oncoming officers, and one of the fugitives was already down on his face, shot through the back of the head, while yet another was limping to one side with a bullet in the leg.

Notwithstanding their still superior numbers, a disastrous panic would have at once seized upon the banded criminals, but for their chief suddenly throwing himself, like a wounded lion, in the breach.

"Cowards!" he shouted, in a voice of thunder; "would ye fly from a paltry trio of these blue-coated hirelings, with me, your master, as the looker-on?"

With that, he hurled his hammer, knocking the foremost of the blue-coats out with a tremendous blow in the chest.

The two others, however, were a credit to the noble force of which they were the representatives.

Without delaying their onward rush an instant, they poured the remaining bullets of their revolvers into the giant's body (though with no more effect than if emptied point-blank against a pillar of steel), and then precipitated themselves upon him with the impetus of a landslide.

Strong, stalwart, fearless as they were, and terrible as was their onslaught, the Colossus laughed it to scorn.

"Ha, ha, ha!" he shouted. "Ho, ho, ho! Pigmies! would ye dash yourselves against the Human Rock?"

And, with incredible activity, he had in an instant snatched them one after another, and hurled them like missiles with such terrific force against the river-fronting partition wall that they were fairly shot, crashingly, through it into the warehouse beyond.

The remaining robbers—with the exception of two who still managed to keep the Holdfast Detective sufficiently busy defending himself—six in number, now rallied round their formidable chief.

"To the river-front!" they cried. "The doors are open—there is our chance to beat a retreat!"

But at this instant a solitary but terrible figure rose between them and the line of retreat they were so eager to gain.

CHAPTER XXXI.

AFTER THE BATTLE.

To Walden—who, beset as he was, had still a weather eye to what was going on in the main struggle—the new element in his favor at first appeared as a tall, slender and cloaked figure bounding forward out of the obscurity of the warehouse.

Then the cloak was suddenly thrown completely aside, there was a blaze of the perfectly-fitting, gilt-buttoned uniform, and, locust in hand, Captain Alexander Williams was in the thick of the criminal squad like a West Indian tornado in the midst of a Trinidad canebrake.

Up and down, right and left—cut, tierce, thrust and carte, almost like a trained fencer's rapier—so rapid were the alternate strokes of that terrible locust and that formidable "left duke" as to suggest the spokes of a swiftly-revolving wheel, and there seemed to be hardly a stroke that did not prostrate a man.

Then there was a sort of staggering pause—like the faint intermission between two opposing blasts of a pair of cyclones careering against each other—and the giants of the criminal and the police worlds came together with an appalling shock.

Considered both in its moral and its physical aspects, the antagonism was no less typical than terrific.

It was social order opposed to criminal chaos, humanity against diabolism, and the collision was not altogether hyperbolically suggestive of

"The terrible trumpet-shock

Of Ragnarok

In the day of doom!"

But even the flower of metropolitan police serviceableness in the shape of the redoubtable Inspector Alexander Williams himself, was for the moment apparently futile against the stupendous criminal force that opposed it.

Whack! whack! again and again pounded his tough locust upon the ruffian's slouch-hatted skull, but only to rebound harmlessly as if encountering so much leather-padded boiler-iron, and finally flying into splinters without so much as dazing its intended victim.

"If I can't kill you," growled the inspector between his teeth, "I may at least mark you!"

With that, nimbly avoiding the giant's pawing clutch, he danced back a pace or two, swung his entire body with the swinging blow, and delivered a tremendous right-hand fencer upon his opponent's forehead.

There was the mark, sure enough, the seemingly bruised skin at once puffing up like a small bladder on the heels of the blow.

However, though it was a blow that might have given John L. Sullivan himself his quietus, it had no more effect upon the recipient, other than maddening him, than if it had fallen upon the brow of the Egyptian Sphinx.

Then at the same time the Colossus bounded forward, like a panther, with a hoarse roar, and the bold inspector was at last engulfed in his Brobdingnagian clutch.

There was a writhing, twisting, twining struggle, suggestive of a tiger in the grip of a rogue elephant, and then brute strength was

the momentary superior of athletic prowess as the dauntless inspector was torn from the floor and hurled away.

It was the Corpulent Mystery's favorite fighting trick, and he this time executed it to perfection.

The officer was shot out into space like a greased projectile out of a catapult.

Through the breach already effected in the partition wall he flew, now doubled up like a ball and now spread out like a swimmer of the air; but for all that, alighting on his feet with the nimbleness of a kitten that is tossed on high, feet uppermost, and then he came back to the fray with the rebound of a spring-board performer, blood in his eye and fire in his tissues.

It might have been bad for the master villain if one of his prostrate subordinates had not suddenly checked the gallant officer's onset by twining his arms about the latter's legs with an unexpectedness that brought him partly down.

True, the inspector freed himself in an instant, but in that instant the robber-chief decided that prudence was the better part of valor.

"The game's off!" he shouted. "Every man for himself!"

And then, for the first time drawing a pistol and snapping it at Williams's head, he turned and dashed toward the rear window with a velocity that defied pursuit, followed by such of his minions as were able to regain their feet.

But the detective, being suddenly freed of his immediate antagonists as they also joined the flight, made a parting clutch at the fleeing Colossus.

He did so by seizing the fluttering skirt of his coat, which forthwith tore off, remaining in his grasp, and then the fugitive had precipitated himself out of the window.

"I'll track him!" cried out Williams, also darting past him. "The mouth of the alley—quick!—to head him off!"

The detective accordingly darted for the front of the store, followed by two of the overthrown policemen, who had by this time succeeded in picking themselves up.

At the mouth of the alley, however, nothing of the chief fugitive could be seen, and they met the inspector with a look of blank amazement on his face.

"The scoundrel must be little short of super-human!" he exclaimed. "I was directly on his heels, yet he seemed to make scarcely a footfall, and then he suddenly vanished from before me. Where is the officer you placed on guard here?"

The roundsman, who was one of the two accompanying the detective, pointed to a uniformed figure standing up rigidly against the alley wall that was in deepest shadow, his arm, club in hand, raised over his head in the act of striking, but seemingly petrified in the attitude, as indeed was betokened by his entire frame, while his face was set and his eyes staring.

"Good Lord!" cried the roundsman, "he seems to have been struck by lightning." And then, grasping the man, he shook him roughly, exclaiming: "Hey there, Jackson! Wake up, man! What the deuce is the matter with you?"

Jackson slowly came out of his trance, or whatever it was.

"Who rushed past me just now?" he stammered, "at the same time throwing a lot of red-hot points out of his finger-ends at me. Hallo! is it you, roundsman? What's to pay, anyway?"

They left him to gather himself together as best he could, rapped for police reinforcements, and then proceeded to sum up the results of the encounter.

The criminal lookout whom Walden had first disarmed and incapacitated at the alley entrance was found to have taken himself off.

The body of the outer window lookout was found back in the alley, where it had fallen, the knife still sticking in the place where Walden had sent it home.

Inside, three dead robbers, two wounded, and two more who had only been stunned, footed up the battle results for the enemy.

On the other side were to be reckoned the unfortunate Irishman who had been killed outright, and Collins, the policeman, who had been prostrated by the flying sledge-hammer, and who was brought around with no little difficulty.

The safe had again come off triumphant from the burglar test, though the office was far more badly wrecked than in the former attempt.

The prisoners were speedily taken into custody, and the property placed under an adequate guard.

On their way up-town together, the inspector noticed that Walden was carrying a small bundle under his arm, and asked what it was.

"Half the boss criminal's inner coat-skirt," was the reply. "You must have seen my final grab for him as he made his dash for the back window."

"Ah, yes; but you will turn it over to the property clerk, of course."

"Certainly, after a little while. But I feel like retaining it as a trophy at present."

Indeed, Walden had already felt something

like a document in the pocket of the fragment; and as soon as he gained the privacy of his own room he lost no time in making an examination.

The coat-skirt contained nothing but a letter, with the New Orleans postmark of a recent date, and the contents proved to be written in cipher.

The detective was an adept at working out cipher-writing, however, and it did not take him a great while to master this one.

Then he read the letter.

To say that it caused him surprise but feebly expresses the impression produced on him.

The letter was, more or less, a revelation.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE MASTER-VILLAIN HOLDS HIS OWN.

"NEW ORLEANS, November —.

"DEAR SIR:—

"Nothing further of interest to report from the — Asylum.

"The authorities there will only admit that the patient known as H. M. has escaped.

"I don't believe they are using any special diligence in trying to recover him.

"The man is not really insane, they say but only weak-minded, and subject to periodical loss of memory.

"Of course, I will do what I can in running him down for you, but the expense to you will be considerable.

"We shall want a thousand dollars cash as a mere retainer, or guarantee of good faith.

"Yours respectfully, etc."

The signature was that of a private detective agency in the Crescent City.

Here was something of a revelation, at least. The detective could not doubt that the initials H. M. referred to Henry Marling, Rose's father; and this confirmed him in the belief that the unfortunate man now under her secret guardianship could be none other than he.

When the coat-skirt was turned over to the property-clerk at Headquarters on the following morning, there was no letter in its pockets.

The newspaper accounts of the tragedy of the preceding night were such a sensation as can be readily imagined; but the preliminary examination of the prisoners before Inspectors Byrnes and Williams elicited nothing that could tend to positively identify Max Marling, otherwise Major Ludgate, with the master-criminal who had effected his escape.

This individual was promptly arrested, and made his appearance before the examiners with his accustomed smiling urbanity—sleek, expensively attired and perfectly self-assured as in the first instance.

"Oh, dear!" he exclaimed. "What do I know about this battle with burglars, the sensation of the hour, you ask? Why, just what I was reading in the papers about it when I gracefully yielded to your order of arrest, as a matter of course. You are not really going to try to identify me with that coarse monster again, I hope."

"That is just what we are going to do, major," said Inspector Byrnes, curtly.

"All right; cut in, gentlemen." And the major tranquilly settled himself down in the unusually capacious arm-chair that had been provided for him.

"How did you employ your valuable time last night?" was a first question.

"Card-playing."

"Where?"

"In The Paradise—a very respectable saloon kept by a friend of mine, at one time highly distinguished in municipal politics. But as you are doubtless totally ignorant of the place, I—"

"You needn't trouble yourself. Of course," sarcastically, "you can produce any number of witnesses in your behalf?"

"Rafts of them, my dear sir! Men of probity, men of distinction, men who, while not perhaps to be enumerated among society's privileged Four Hundred, are none the less so highly characterized, so socially distinguished—"

"Shut up! Mr. Walden, do you identify this man as identical with the Chief of the Silver Gang?"

The detective was compelled to answer that he could not positively do so, inasmuch as the major's face and voice were so totally different, though he was morally certain that the two men were one and the same.

Inspector Williams could not do so either.

"The boss scoundrel I fought with last night," he said, "ought to have a lump on his forehead as big as my fist."

"And I have not a mark," observed the major, triumphantly.

"You might have worn a flesh-and-blood mask, then," said the officer, angrily, "no less than a padded steel cap on your head and bullet-proof armor under your clothes."

The major smiled amusedly, shrugged his great shoulders, and indicated the top of his head, which was slightly bald.

"As for my wearing a mask," he remarked, "it is simply preposterous. And you can examine me, as you did before, if you really imagine that I wear concealed armor."

"Of course, you wouldn't be wearing such things now," interposed Inspector Byrnes; and then he whispered to his colleague: "It wouldn't pay to try him in the sweater, eh?"

Williams shook his head.

"He might mesmerize the whole building, for all we know," was the reply. "Besides, nothing of that sort would avail with this man."

Then turning to the major, he said:

"You still amuse yourself with mesmerizing experiments, I presume?"

"Oh, on occasion, yes," was the smiling reply.

"So does the Chief of the Silver Gang?"

"I should judge so from the accounts. Odd, too! for it is not a gift often accorded to coarse or immoral organizations, in my opinion. By the way, inspector, you haven't the right word. We don't mesmerize nowadays. We hypnotize."

"Suppose you should give us an example of your power in this line now."

"With all my heart!"

"You can begin on me," Williams remarked.

Instantly an extraordinary change came over the major.

He stiffened straight up in his chair, his face became set, his eyes glowed strangely, and he stretched forth his finger-ends toward the inspector with a suggestion of power and command that it is not possible to adequately describe.

The inspector remained immovable, though very serious.

"You are not 'subjective'—at least not at present," admitted the major, coming out of the 'state' as readily as he had gone into it. "But you might be under more favorable conditions."

Williams made no contemptuous reply, as might have been expected of him; in fact, he didn't make any at all, but remained very serious.

"Try me," suggested Byrnes.

The major shook his head, with a deprecating smile.

He was not essaying hypnotic experiments on chiefs of detective bureaus just then; or it might be that he divined the doughty inspector would prove no more promising than his colleague.

Then the major suddenly looked at Walden with a peculiar expression.

"There's a man," he said, softly, "whom I would have no objection to make an experiment on."

The detective retained his composure, but shook his head decidedly, doubtless in wholesome remembrance of his experience in the hackney-coach.

"It's a pity, then," continued the major, his eyes wandering over the squad of stalwart policemen who were present, "that I can't gratify you with a little exhibition of my little gift in this line. You see, I like to be obliging."

Inspector Williams also looked the men over, and then called out two names.

Their owners, exceptionally powerful, resolute-looking officers, stepped out from the line of their companions.

"Stand up before this man," continued the inspector, "and let him make good his vaunt, if he can."

The pair obeyed, whereat the major offered an objection.

"I don't pretend to be able to control two subjects at the same time," he observed. "No hypnotizer that I ever heard of can do that."

"Take 'em singly then," was the order.

"All right!"

Again he passed promptly into the "state," his strangely-quivering outstretched fingers being directed toward the smaller of the two candidates.

There were two or three lightning-like passes, and the subject trembled like a leaf.

Then he suddenly leaned up against Byrnes's desk, and stood as if petrified there.

It was sufficiently evident that the man was totally unconscious.

The other subject, who had witnessed his companion's discomfiture with manifest uneasiness, started to desert his post.

There was a fresh out-sweeping gesture of the mesmerizing hand, which brought him to a sudden standstill.

Then a pass or two, and he was on his knees at the mesmerizer's feet, spellbound, or like a man in a somnambulistic fit.

Coming out of his own "state," without relieving the men from the spell he seemed to have cast over them, "Ludgate" looked up with his genial smile.

"If you are interested," he said, with a glance at the two inspectors, "I don't mind if I push the experiment a little further."

"We are interested," admitted Byrnes.

"There is no denying that."

"Thank you. I shall then show you something of the power of suggestion, as it's called in this new but still little understood science. Have you something like a dagger that is yet not a dagger—that might be used as such without any harm being done, you know?"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

DEEPENING MYSTERIES.

"How will this do?" Inspector Byrnes held up a fragile paper-knife of ebony inlaid with mother-

"The very thing." And the instrument was accordingly handed to the major.

He then fixed his eyes steadfastly on the officer kneeling before him.

"Here is a knife," he said, impressively. "It is a good knife, strong, sharp and keen. How admirable to drive this knife into the heart of your hated enemy! Inspector Byrnes is your enemy, and you ought to hate him. Five minutes hence you will see this knife—observe it, this very knife and none other—lying on his desk. You will at once snatch it up and plunge it into his breast."

The major then sent the paper-knife back to the inspector, with the request that it might be exposed again on his desk five minutes later.

Then, after a pass or two over the kneeler's forehead, he commanded him to rise.

The officer did so, rubbing his eyes bewilderedly, after which, with an apologetical obeisance to the two inspectors, herejoined his companions with a very sheepish expression.

The major quietly turned his attention to the other victim of his spell, who was still propped up against the desk as if frozen there.

"Dancing is a noble amusement, my friend," he said, with the same quiet impressiveness as in the first instance. "I suggest to you that you shall execute a break-down before Inspector Williams's desk just five minutes hence."

A pass of the white, powerful hand, and this man's trance was also dissipated, after which he returned to his place quite as shame-faced as his predecessor had done.

Major Ludgate then began to discourse upon the subject of hypnotism, or animal magnetism, for the benefit of the two inspectors particularly, and so learnedly and agreeably that every one was interested perforce.

Indeed, the promised results of his experiments was almost if not quite forgotten, when suddenly Dalton, the first "subject" who had been impressed with the "suggestion," darted forward in a mechanical way, and, snatching up the paper-knife, drove it against Byrnes's breast with such force as to splinter it to pieces.

After that, he stood in a perfectly dazed way, scratching his head and turning very red, a picture of bewildered humiliation.

"Why did you do that?" demanded the inspector, with assumed severity.

"God help me, sir! I really don't know," stammered the man. "I somehow felt that I must do it, and— Well, I just couldn't help myself."

"Did any one suggest such an outrageous action to you?"

"Not that I am aware of, sir."

At this juncture, Officer Heimbarger, the other "subject"—a man noted for the sobriety and seriousness of his general demeanor—gave a ringing whoop, and, springing into the middle of the floor, he began to dance an old-fashioned "hoe-down" with a vigor and enjoyment that would have done credit to a professional clog-dancer.

"Major Ludgate, you can go!" roared out the inspector. "Get out of this!"

And the Corpulent Mystery accordingly withdrew, with his accustomed politeness, and urbanity.

Shortly after the conclusion of this decidedly unique examination, Wirt Walden was going to his lunch when he received a message from Mr. Hardman, with a rather peremptory request for his presence at that gentleman's place of business at the earliest convenience.

"Well, I'll fortify myself first, anyway," grumbled the detective; and he accordingly kept on his way to his favorite restaurant.

It was but natural that he should feel some timidity about approaching the merchant after the extraordinary events of the preceding night, and the result justified his reluctance when he finally did venture to put in an appearance.

To say that the old gentleman was mad, would but feebly express the nature and extent of his indignation.

In fact, he was at first too angry to even swear, though he presently warmed up out of his white wrath quite creditably.

"So you did set your trap for your master-villain in my store, after all!" he roared. "Good God! what a shipwreck and slaughter-pen you have made of it! And that without securing your game, after all, as I learn!"

And so on indefinitely.

Walden calmly waited for his fury to exhaust itself, and then gently ventured to submit that, though the chief social enemy had succeeded in making his escape, a number of the gang had been secured, red-handed, while several of them had been killed.

But this had small effect toward assuaging the merchant's indignation.

"Zounds! and so was my faithful porter, Mike Lyons, killed!" he exclaimed; "as good and honest a hard-worker as ever lived, with a widow and children to mourn him—to say nothing of the brave dog that died in the same worthless cause. A pretty trap, indeed! And who is to pay for all this, I'd like to know?" with a wave of the hand at the carpenters and glaziers who were busy upon the necessary repairs.

"I really don't know, sir, unless you do it

yourself," was the dejected response. "However," brightening up, "that's a stunning good money-safe of yours, Mr. Hardman. Gad! it ought to be reckoned burglar-proof enough by this time."

The old gentleman simply plumped himself down in his revolving chair, and glared.

Justice couldn't be done the matter, and there was no use making any further attempt.

The detective finally mentioned the fact that he would have to quit the city for a week or ten days in connection with the case, and then managed to make his escape, after stealing a wondering look at Miss Marling, who had calmly remained at her desk throughout the entire interview.

Horace Allen, however, followed him out of the office, a half-amused smile betraying itself under his mustache.

"You mustn't mind my uncle's fury," he said. "You see, he has some excuse for it, after all."

"I should say he had!"

"You are really going away?"

"Yes; matters will 'keep' hereabouts till my return."

"Any advice for me while you are gone?"

"Nothing especial save to let matters remain as they are. By the way, the young lady accompanied you to the family dinner, I suppose?"

"Yes," brightly; "and she really seemed to enjoy it, too, though she insisted on leaving rather early. But—"

"But what?"

"Miss Marling seems unaccountably out of sorts this morning."

"In what way?"

"Oh, I scarcely know!—listless and fagged out, or so it seems to me."

"Ah! But she'll be all right, trust me for that. In the mean time, I hope you will retain your apartments in the same building with her."

"Indeed, yes! I shall continue to watch over her while keeping my distance, if I can do nothing better."

"That is best. And in the mean time, continue to respect her exclusiveness. All will yet be well, I promise you; and perhaps sooner than you can hope for."

The detective then hurried back to Headquarters, where he felt certain that his chief would be desirous of talking to him alone, which proved to be the fact.

"Walden," said Inspector Byrnes, at the outset of their private interview, "from the relations you must have had with both characters, I cannot understand why you, at least, should not yet be able to positively identify this devil's lieutenant, Major Ludgate, with the Chief of the Silver Gang."

"In the first place, Mr. Inspector," replied the detective, "let me make my full report of my last night's adventures. You may then understand my position somewhat better."

"Go ahead."

The detective accordingly did so, his auditor listening with deeper and deeper interest as he proceeded.

"Of course," the latter admitted, "I could not have surmised what you underwent prior to your arrival at the down-town warehouse. Extraordinary, very extraordinary! That young lady must be little short of a heroine."

"She isn't short of it at all."

"And you now wish to go to New Orleans to confer with the authorities of that lunatic asylum?"

"Yes."

"But for what purpose, if you are convinced that Miss Marling is even harboring her long-missing father in secret?"

"I am no longer perfectly convinced of that. You must remember that, in the brief glimpse I had of her mysterious invalid, I did not see his face, but only external indications that he is an old and feeble person."

"Well?"

"Well, it is just this way, inspector: After what I owe to Miss Marling in my last night's up-river adventure, I want to respect her secret, whatever it may be; while proceeding in my own way to follow up this new clew."

"Go ahead, then. I'll see to it that Miss Marling is not further annoyed during your absence, if secret police protection can be of any avail. And, as for the major, I rather think he will be content to remain quiet for a spell. Besides, it is a satisfaction to know that we have so many of his gang in quod, with a fair chance of securing the remainder. But you haven't told me why you have remained so uncertain in establishing the identity of the one villain with the other."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

WALDEN MAKES A NEW DEPARTURE.

"BUT why shouldn't Inspector Williams identify the one with the other, as well as I?" Walden asked, after a moment's pause.

"Well," continued Inspector Byrnes, "Williams hasn't had the same intimate relations with the two characters that you have had."

"I only know this," returned the detective, doggedly, "that I would only too gladly swear

to the men being one and the same, if I conscientiously could. But you ought to see for yourself the absolute difference in the two, barring only their muscular corpulence of figure. It is a difference of day and night, and extends no less to the faces than to the voices, and pretty much everything else. I am simply bewildered when I think of it. While morally certain that the villains are one and the same, from every deduction that I can bring to bear on the comparison, lo and behold! I see the one apart from the other—though of course I couldn't see them in any other way—and I am filled with doubts; in fact, it seems to me *physically* impossible that they can be identical. But, by Jupiter! the mystery sha'n't remain unsolved another fortnight, inspector," desperately. "I give you my professional word on that!"

The inspector remained for some moments in a cogitation, in which he doubtless secretly acknowledged that the mystery was no less puzzling to himself than to others.

At all events, he looked up indulgently at last, and nodded.

"Take yourself to New Orleans, then, Walden," he said, kindly.

The detective turned to go, and then stopped, struck by a sudden thought.

"You'll be sure, I hope, inspector," he said, "to have the young lady's residence under constant protection?"

"Of course, I will," a little brusquely. "What makes you ask that so anxiously?"

"You see, when they had the best of me up in the Spuyten Duyvil house I thought I was a goner, inspector."

"Well?"

"Well, I taunted the scoundrel with what I then believed to be the fact—that his victim, Rose Marling's father, was even then in her care."

"Oho!"

"That is it. Now, believing this from me, he may be tempted to give her fresh trouble. See?"

"Yes," thoughtfully. "But I shall take care of that. The young man, Mr. Allen, still occupies rooms in the same house, I believe?"

"Yes."

"All right. Both the young lady and her belongings shall be kept under watch and ward night and day."

By the middle of the afternoon the detective had taken the cars for the Southwest.

The journey, which would have been tedious, was a real rest to him.

Arriving in New Orleans, the detective made no attempt to call upon the detective agents who were in correspondence with the Corpulent Mystery, but, directly after a recuperative night's rest at a hotel, he proceeded up the river to the State Lunatic Asylum, which proved to be the very best step he could have taken.

Introducing himself to Dr. Fullgrove, the superintendent, he first assured himself that this personage was in all probability a conscientious and capable man, thoroughly understanding his duties and responsibilities.

The detective thereupon frankly stated the object of his visit as being to discover, if possible, some traces of the fugitive patient, H. M.

"Have you communicated with — on the subject?" cautiously inquired the superintendent, mentioning Max Marling's New Orleans correspondents.

"I have not," was the prompt reply, "nor do I wish to have anything to do with them."

"Why not, permit me to ask?"

"Their having confidential relations with such a scoundrel as Max Marling was sufficient to place me on my guard against them."

"And in whose interest are you seeking this information?"

"In the interest of his daughter, Miss Rose Marling, as pure and noble and unjustly wretched a young lady as ever lived."

Dr. Fullgrove seemed surprised.

"Indeed!" he exclaimed.

"Is it possible," cried the detective, surprised in his turn, "that you are unacquainted with the unfortunate gentleman's family history?"

"I know comparatively nothing of it," was the reply.

"Will you then vouchsafe to tell the circumstances under which he came here?"

"I'll do that."

And the story was forthwith told.

It seemed that, on a date five years or a little more previous, a gentleman, evidently demented, had been found wandering about the Crescent City. The authorities had taken him in charge, and an examination of some unimportant papers found in the man's pockets had established his identity with one Henry Marling, of Richmond, Va. He had been temporarily committed pending a decision upon his mental condition, while Mr. Max Marling had been promptly communicated with, as being the name mentioned in several of the documents.

Max had hurried to New Orleans, and told his own story with regard to the wanderer. The latter had then been committed to the State Asylum as a pay patient, Max agreeing to pay liberally for his treatment and security there by representing that such was also the wish of the unfortunate man's son and daughter, of whom

he, Max, their uncle, had been legally constituted the guardian. Some difficulty had arisen by reason of the patient not being a citizen of the State, but this objection had been overcome, and Max had, in good faith, paid for his patient's accommodations up to the latter's escape from the institution, about one month previous to the detective's visit.

Dr. Fullgrove, however, had only been made superintendent of the asylum some years after H. M.'s admission, and, from several personal interviews that he had had with the alleged half brother, Max, he had conceived a strong distrust for him, finally to the extent of imagining that H. M. might be the victim of a plot, no less than of a mental alienation attributable to natural causes. But written inquiries to the Richmond authorities had failed to elicit any satisfactory information as to the whereabouts of the patient's children, Max had continued to pay liberally for the superior accommodations furnished, and so the matter had gone up to the time of the escape.

The detective was astonished to find how easily Mr. Marling's original disappearance had been developed into a first-class mystery, and with what facility the latter had been fostered.

"Now, sir," said he, "let me tell you the true story of this unhappy gentleman's family history."

He accordingly did so, together with an abstract of such details as have gone to make up the foregoing narrative almost in its entirety.

The superintendent was becoming interested and amazed.

"Of course," he observed, "if I could have suspected anything of this sort, I would have communicated with Miss Marling at once. But let us hope that it is not altogether too late to right the wronged, and set this long and painful complication at rest."

"I rejoice to hear you talk in this strain, sir!" cried the detective. "But tell me, have you any notion of the course of the patient's wanderings since his escape from your institution?"

"None whatever," replied the superintendent, after a pause.

"Might he have found his way to New York City, think you?"

"I am all but positive that he could not have done so by any possibility."

This was something of a disappointment for Walden, for in this case what of the old man whom he was equally positive he had caught a glimpse of in Miss Marling's apartments, and of whose presence she was making such a mystery?

"May I be permitted to understand the nature of the gentleman's malady?" he inquired.

"Certainly. H. M. is intermittently insane, but never violently so."

"Ah!"

"He is mostly subject to complete lapses of memory, during which his past life seems to be a complete blank, and he is doubtless wholly unaware of his own identity."

"But there are intervals of complete restoration in this respect?"

"Rare ones, happening perhaps once a month on the average, and lasting variously, sometimes for but a brief hour, and again for whole days."

"And his understanding is completely restored during these intervals?"

"Unfortunately, yes; that is, it has thus far been unfortunate for him that such should be the case."

"You surprise me. Pray explain."

"His brief hours of mental restoration are scenes of constant violence and fury, to which his imbecile periods are strangers. The sudden return of memory becomes his torment. He does nothing while it lasts but rave against the man Max Marling as the ruiner of his life, the evil genius of his fortunes, or wildly demand information of his children, which of course we have been unable to give. He will also rave about some papers which it seems that he once intrusted to his daughter, and which he declares will thoroughly establish his innocence of past wrongdoing, and afford him a fresh start in life, besides bringing his arch-enemy, Max, to retribution."

"Ah! I begin to understand."

"But what could we do?" continued Dr. Fullgrove, earnestly. "We had already sought for information of his children's whereabouts in vain. Enemy or not, Max Marling was paying us for keeping the patient in charge; and we dared not let him go in these paroxysms of sanity, as you might call them, knowing by experience the dazed and helpless imbecility that must sooner or later intervene. It is altogether the most remarkable case that has ever come under my treatment."

CHAPTER XXXV

THE INSANE PATIENT.

THE detective reflected over what he had listened to, and then said:

"Doctor, to what do you attribute H. M.'s mental alienation in the first place?"

"As near as I can judge, without having studied the origin of his disease," Dr. Fullgrove slowly replied, "I attribute it to mental over-

work, perhaps assisted by some constant trouble or fear, doubtless of a secret nature, persistent and wearing."

Walden looked at him steadily.

"I have given you some notion," he said, "of the extraordinary mesmeric, or hypnotic, powers possessed by this man, Max Marling, in addition to his general iniquity of character. What do you think of them?"

The superintendent gave a start, and then became reflective.

"Hypnotism—animal magnetism," he mused aloud, "is a strange thing. As a science—if science it is—we almost understand nothing of it as yet."

"But you believe in its existence and exercise as an occult power?"

"Yes," hesitatingly.

"I have already given you some illustrations of this man's extraordinary power in this respect. Now tell me, might not a secret exercise of such a power upon Mr. Henry Marling's temperament—perhaps an exceptionally 'subjective' or sensitive one, and the exertion of such power to have lasted a long time, perhaps for a lifetime, or since boyhood, and in spite of the victim's struggles against it—I say might not that more than anything else have been chiefly instrumental in originating the mental deterioration that originally struck him down?"

"Yes, it might!" exclaimed Dr. Fullgrove, with sudden energy. "It might, indeed, it might, indeed!" and he began to pace the apartment with knitted brows. "I am glad for this meeting with you, Mr. Walden, and the revelations it has led up to. This suggestion may be of great importance—very!"

"Has H. M. been regarded as incurable?" demanded the detective.

"Yes, up to this time."

"But now?"

"Well, on this new theory of his malady's cause proving the true one, his case might not be so hopeless."

"Might a sudden shock of joy during one of his paroxysms of sanity, as you graphically call them, effect it?—such a shock, for instance, as would arise from his unexpectedly finding himself permanently reunited with his daughter, relieved of any further fears of his presumed mesmerizing foe, together with a consciousness of his good name being once more without a stain in the business world?"

Dr. Fullgrove looked at his visitor in a startled way.

"You are a man of bold ideas and hopeful conclusions, Mr. Walden," he observed.

"Please answer my question, doctor."

"Yes, then; at least I see no reason for the impossibility, or even the improbability, of such a revolution in the patient's mental condition thus wrought upon in the manner that you suggest."

"Oh, why and how did he escape, then?" cried the detective, despondently. "I might have effected his regeneration and brought about his daughter's happiness—in fact, I am here in that forlorn hope—but for this fatal chance that has again cast him, a nameless waif, upon the thronging world!"

The superintendent seemed not a little impressed by these words.

"We mustn't despair yet awhile," he remarked. "H. M. may not yet be beyond our reach."

"What!" exclaimed Walden, eagerly; "it is your opinion that I shall be able to track him, then?"

"Very likely—with my assistance."

"Ha! you must already have some idea as to his whereabouts?"

The superintendent smiled.

"Well, rather!"

"Where do you think he is?"

"I don't think anything about it—I know."

"You know?"

"Certainly."

"Speak, then! where is he?"

"Here in this institution, safe and sound in his old quarters."

The detective started to his feet.

"Good heavens, sir! you would not jest with me?"

"I never jest, Mr. Walden; I consider it undignified, to say the least."

The detective wiped his brow and resumed his seat in a decidedly improved state of mind.

"Do explain, doctor!" he said, almost plaintively.

"With all my heart! and it is easily done. The patient wandered back of his own accord three days ago. That is all there is about it."

"But this is not generally known."

"We have not intended that it should be."

"Why, permit me to ask?"

"That rascally private detective firm in New Orleans might otherwise discover more than is good for them—or, rather, more than is good for our patient."

"Aha! in the interest of Max Marling, eh?"

"Exactly."

"I am glad to see that you have lost faith in this Max Marling."

"Never had any. As I've already intimated, I have suspected his motives almost from the first, but, as he paid up regularly, there has been

no real cause of complaint until now that I am indebted to you for this enlightenment."

"Thank you. Where could the patient have wandered to during his few days of liberty?"

"It would be difficult to say. He managed to give us the slip during one of his sane, but exasperated, intervals. He came back to us—perhaps kindly guided, perhaps by a sort of instinct—dazed, taciturn and listless, which is his ordinary condition."

"Doctor, you are going to let me take this man back to New York with me, I hope."

"That depends. But I confess that I shall think the matter over with a decided prepossession in your favor."

"May I see the patient?"

"Of course you can. Come with me."

The superintendent forthwith conducted his visitor into one of the wards that chanced to be occupied by only three or four patients, all of the harmless sort.

A slender, white-haired gentleman, of stately and refined appearance, who had been pacing restlessly before two large windows, turned abruptly at their entrance, and then strode quickly toward them, there being not a sign of insanity in his appearance, though his eyes were sparkling with ill-humor, and he seemed to be prodigiously indignant generally.

"It is he!" exclaimed the superintendent, in a whisper. "Bless me! one of his sane intervals is upon him again. Leave it all to me."

"So, sir!" exclaimed the patient, with ill-suppressed scorn; "I again come back to my proper mind to find myself still in this accursed institution a prisoner, a slave, the enforced companion of driving idiots and howling maniacs. Once more I demand my rights of you, Dr. Fullgrove."

"You shall have them, and on the spot, sir!" cried the superintendent with such suddenness and heartiness that the other's mood changed instantly to one of astonishment. "I mean just what I say, Mr. Marling. You doubtless remember my heretofore arguments with you on this subject, sir?"

This must have been an entirely novel mode of meeting the patient's demand for his liberty. At all events, he seemed completely dumfounded for the time being.

"Yes, sir," he stammered in reply, "I believe I do."

"You will remember," continued the alienist, confidentially, "that I have heretofore refused your demand on the ground that you would scarcely be able to take care of yourself, be ore another fit of vacancy would leave you stranded and helpless among strangers!"

"I—I think I do, sir."

"And also on the ground that the whereabouts of your children was entirely unknown to me?"

"Yes, sir—yes, sir!"

"Well, I congratulate you, my friend. These objections no longer exist. Your daughter is living in New York—this gentleman is her friend—he is here for the express purpose of taking you to her, and with my fullest and freest consent!"

The poor gentleman staggered back with a sort of smothered cry, placing his hands over his face.

When he withdrew them an extraordinary change had taken place in it.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE NEW LIGHT.

THE man's worn face was fairly transfigured.

If his sane period had heretofore been a paroxysm, it was now an ecstasy.

"You do not mean it?" he cried, hoarsely, interrogating the superintendent with a half-frightened look. "And yet do not, do not, in God's mercy, tell me that you are deluding me!"

"I do mean it, and I am not deluding you," replied the physician, with impressive earnestness, and at the same time studying the patient intently. "Everything I have told you is God's truth. This gentleman is Mr. Walden, of New York. He is your daughter's friend. He will not quit this institution without your accompanying him, to be received in your daughter's arms!"

The man quivered and he seemed about to faint; but, recovering, he ran to the detective and embraced him.

"You tell me also that it is true!" he murmured, half sobbingly. "Say it—speak it out—and I will bless you for it!"

"I do say it with all my heart!" cried Walden, brimful of pity and thankfulness. "It is true, sir, all true, every word of it!"

The patient released him in order to clasp his hands, which he wrung with pathetic agitation.

"My daughter—my beautiful Rose!" he faltered; "you will take me to her?"

"Yes, yes!"

"She is in New York, and well—happy?"

"Well and happy, save only for your long absence from her devoted heart."

"Ah, that is Rose—my beautiful Rose! And my boy, Ralph—they are twins, you know—what of him?"

"Well—url—Ralph is not in New York at present. He is—url—traveling, I believe."

"No matter, no matter; Rose is first in everything—she was always my brave, strong Rose! But stay!" a look of mingled fury and terror rushing into his face. "I have an enemy—a fiend—a man of all but magical powers. Do you know him? My foster-brother, Max Marling—curses upon him!" he gnashed his teeth. "Tell me if you know him?"

Dr. Fullgrove gave the detective an anxious and warning look over the patient's shoulder, but Walden was evidently master of the situation.

"Know him, that criminal?" replied the detective, indifferently. "Oh, yes, every one knows him, the police authorities especially, though," with a contemptuous laugh, "they'll soon know him too well for his good, I fancy."

Mr. Marling's expression had grown eager and hopeful.

"Hail the villain is then proscribed, branded, hunted, perhaps?" he cried, feverishly.

"That he is, my friend. But make yourself easy. Really the cheap scoundrel is not worth talking about."

"Hail but his mysterious power! Look you!" he made the tremulous mesmerizing motions with his hands; "did he ever do that to you?"

"Never!" and Walden mentally asked pardon for the falsehood while uttering it. "I'd have shot him in short order, if he had."

"Shot him? Ah, that would have been glorious!" with a wild laugh. "But, look you, friend," softening again, "you will take me away from this—take me back to Rose?"

"Yes, yes."

"You—you will not desert me, even if I—if I should—forget things again?" with a piteous expression.

"Never; I swear it!"

"Thanks, thanks!" his hand wandering over his brow. "But you see this—this is a little sudden on me, I'm afraid."

Then he fell down in a faint.

Dr. Fullgrove motioned the detective to retire, and, calling some attendants, had the patient carried to his room.

Walden went back to the doctor's office, scarcely knowing whether to argue hopefulness or discouragement from what had happened.

But when the superintendent rejoined him there, it was with a beaming look.

"What!" cried the detective; "is the news good news?"

"Excellent!" replied Dr. Fullgrove. "My friend, if all is as I hope for H. M., I shall owe it to you."

And he grasped the detective's hand warmly. "Thanks! But how goes it with him?"

"As never before after one of these sane periods. He is sleeping naturally and with a wholly unperturbed, restful appearance. If he shall only wake up with the period renewed, with no relapse into his mental cloudland!"

"Hail! Will his cure then have been made?"

"It will have been nobly begun, at all events."

"Heaven grant it may prove so! I only hope, in addition, that I shall not be long delayed in taking him away with me."

"There will then be no need of any delay—in fact, the sooner a change of scene can be had for him the better. Now join me at dinner."

Mr. Fullgrove's family chanced to be absent on a visit, so that his guest and he dined alone.

The repast was served in an open piazza, overlooking the vast expanse and turbid current of the Father of Waters together with a wide stretch of plantations.

Though now well on toward the first of December, the season was still that of a latter summer in this semi-tropical clime, roses and honeysuckles blooming on the vines climbing about the porch, and everywhere an undiminished luxuriance of vegetation, while the vivid sunshine was more than comfortably warm.

When they were discussing the dessert, after a rarely appetizing repast plentifully interspersed with fruits, a gentleman was seen approaching the building over the well-kept grounds whose appearance caused the superintendent to grow stern.

"Be on your guard!" he observed, to his guest. "Here comes Blackley, of Blackley and Blivens, on another spying and prying errand concerning the fugitive patient, H. M."

It was the detective agency firm that were Max Marling's New Orleans correspondents.

But Walden, who had already noticed the new arrival, began to look a little uncomfortable, and not without reason, as quickly appeared.

After responding in a very unceremonious way to the professor's decidedly stiff-necked salutation, the visitor—a short, strongly-built man, with a shrewd but rather brutal face—eyed the guest inquisitively, and then cried out:

"By Jove! I was sure I was not mistaken. It's Walden, sure as a gun. Hallo, Holdfast! how are you? Don't you remember me in that Alabama forgery case two years ago? And what brings you down in Louisiana this time?"

The New York detective had quickly recovered his composure.

"Oh, a very trifling inquiry in New Orleans," he replied, nonchalantly. "And I couldn't re-

sist the temptation of running up here by rail for a chat with my old friend Fullgrove. And how are Blackley and Blivens?"

The new-comer replied in kind, and, apparently altogether unsuspecting, asked if any news had been heard of the fugitive patient.

"Nothing whatever," was the superintendent's rather irritable, if mendacious, response. "You're both lawyer and detective, and therefore should know more about a runaway than I. Besides, I told you distinctly, sir, that I would telegraph you in case of getting any word of the fugitive."

"Ah, yes; I'm quite well aware that you told me so," Mr. Blackley coolly helped himself, unbidden, to a seat near the table. "By the way, professor, I don't mind taking a glass of that claret with you. Though it's but a short tramp from the station, I'm warmer than a boiled owl."

He remained boring them with vulgar and flippant talk for half an hour, after which he was good enough to take himself off, seemingly perfectly satisfied, though neither the professor nor his guest was deceived in this.

"The ferrety brute!" commented the former. "How unfortunate that he should have met you before! He already suspects the object of your visit here."

"Worse than that," replied the detective, "he will telegraph the alarm to Max Marling with the least possible delay. So much the greater reason that I should get started Northward with my prize in haste."

"That is true. I must take a look at our patient. Pray, come with me."

The patient was awake when they visited his couch, and his condition was found to be both encouraging and—in view of Blackley's inopportune appearance—disappointing.

That is, he had awakened with his mind clearer than before, but in a state of great physical exhaustion.

He seized the detective's hand, and retained hold of it while they were at his side.

"You won't desert me?" he begged. "Now on the threshold of this new life that comes to my soul, you will not desert me?"

"Never, by Jupiter! Mr. Marling," was the fervent reply. "Trust me for that."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

NEW DANGER AHEAD.

"WELL, what is your verdict?" the detective anxiously demanded, of the asylum superintendent, as soon as they were once more alone together.

"Mentally, the improvement is all that could be desired," was the reply. "In fact, it is altogether exceptional. If he can be kept free from any deterrent excitement, I do not see why there should be any reaction from these happy conditions at all."

"But physically?"

"The prostration is excessive. But even that is a good sign, foretelling a complete mental cure."

"How soon can he be got in readiness for the journey North?"

"Inside of three days, I think."

"Three days!" echoed Walden, desperately.

"By that time the Corpulent Mystery may be on hand to interfere, either secretly or openly."

"The Corpulent Mystery? Ah, I understand—Mr. Max Marling?"

"Yes."

"Well, it can't be helped. Of course, I'll expedite the matter as best I may. Besides, one of my keepers shall make the journey with you."

Walden, with his accustomed self-confidence, was about to decline this offer, but on reflection accepted it.

"Malone is the best keeper we have ever had in the institution," continued Dr. Fullgrove. "And, moreover, he has had much to do with H. M. and is thoroughly conversant with his idiosyncrasies."

"But is he 'game' that is chiefly what I want to know."

"Game as a bulldog and tenacious as a leech. But I'll introduce him to you at once."

Keeper Malone on being summoned proved to be a little man, but one that seemed to be exceedingly tough and wiry, and with a hatchet-face and deep-set, piercing gray eyes, which alike were indicative of resolution and courage.

"I think we can manage the transfer together, sir, without any sort of difficulty," he remarked, when the situation had been explained to him. "And I am really glad that such luck is in store for the poor gentleman. You seem to apprehend interference."

"There's no use blinking it, my friend," replied the detective; "I do apprehend just that."

"Be jabbers, then, we'll manage the affair, sir!" cheerily cried the keeper, a rich brogue cropping out in his speech. "I'll bargain to keep Mr. Marling out of harm's way, and, if there's fighting to be done, we'll share it between the two of us."

The detective accordingly took up his quarters in accommodations furnished him by the

superintendent and awaited the result with such philosophy and patience as he could command.

"All went exceptionally well."

At the end not of three, but only two days, the convalescent was pronounced ready for the journey.

His mind had remained clear, and physically he was much improved.

The professor was greatly elated, and shook hands heartily with the detective at parting.

"This is so wonderful that I can scarcely realize it," he said, confidentially. "Remember the advice I have given you from time to time, my dear sir, and don't forget to telegraph me of your safe arrival in New York. Good-by, Malone."

The final hand-grip was from Mr. Marling himself, and then the party rattled away in a light open wagon for the railway station.

They had, however, no sooner taken their seats in the parlor car accommodations that had been secured, than the little Irishman gave Walden a significant look, which was accompanied by a jerk of the head in the direction of the window.

The detective looked out.

Yes; there could be no doubt of it. Blackley was just getting on the train, accompanied by a tall, powerful, black-bearded man.

Then the conductor's "All aboard!" cry rung out, and they were fairly startled, with such new danger ahead as this circumstance might signify.

The detective and keeper, however, managed to exchange a mutually reassuring look, while their charge was looking out of the window, and taking an all but childish interest in the novelty of his surroundings.

Fortunately, it was a very light train, the trio having the entire car to themselves.

It was speedily evident that the enemy were going to lose but little time in their system of molestation.

In less than half an hour, and directly after the conductor had made his official passage through the car, the rear door opened, and Mr. Private Detective Blackley stepped smilingly, smirkingly into the aisle.

Walden alone—who was facing his two companions, with his back to the engine—perceived the intrusion at the instant of its occurrence.

Mr. Marling might be unnecessarily excited should he catch sight of the New Orleans expert, inasmuch as he had seen him several times before, and was perhaps aware of his vocation.

The New York detective, therefore, yawned, quitted his seat quietly, and, genially approaching the intruder before the latter had taken six steps up the passage, knocked him down incontinently with a tremendous but all but soundless blow between the eyes.

Malone had turned his head in time to perceive the trick, while Mr. Marling had not been disturbed in the least.

The train chanced to be slowing up at an approach to a station.

In other instant Walden had collared his man, and dragged him out upon the intervening platform.

"Who is the blackguard who got on the train with you?" he demanded, with an oath.

Blackley's eyes were already going into profound mourning, but he looked up with a sinister and defiant stare.

"Find out!" he growled. "You'll pay for this, curse you!"

"Where have you agreed to meet the villain, Max Marling?"

"Don't you wish you knew?"

The detective calmly picked the spy up, tossed him off the platform into a wayside ditch, and returned, altogether unruffled, to his seat.

Mr. Marling was still placidly enjoying the panorama of travel.

Malone was convulsed with silent laughter, his beady gray eyes fairly dancing in the caverns under his brows.

He had somehow witnessed the entire transaction, and seemed to regard it as excruciatingly humorous.

The train made such a brief halt that it was fair to presume that the discomfited Blackley would have to content himself with the next one in order to resume his northward trail, if, indeed, the tumble should not have broken his neck.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THROUGH WRECK AND RUIN.

ABOUT an hour later, the car occupied by the trio being still without other passengers, the rear door again opened, and there was another cautious intrusion.

It was the tall black-bearded man who got upon the train with Blackley.

The detective's eyes suddenly brightened. By great good luck, he recognized the fellow at last; but a like quiet summariness would not be possible in this case, for the intruder was already too far advanced up the aisle.

He was, moreover, looking about him with a nonplused expression, as if he might have lost or missed something.

"My dear Mr. Marling," observed the detec-

tive, quite gayly, "didn't you use to somewhat enjoy seeing a little scrimmage in your earlier days?"

The old gentleman suddenly brightened, much to the satisfaction of Malone, who had begun to grow a little anxious.

"What! a sparring scrap?" he asked.

"Y-e-s; only perhaps a little one-sided one, you might say."

"Well, let me see; I think I did use to have something of a taste for athletics."

"Here's for a revival of your old inclinations, then."

And, forthwith popping up in his seat, the detective fetched the tall fellow a staggerer in the jaw.

But this customer proved to be something of a fighter on his own account, and there was a brief but lively "scrap" before the New Yorker brought him to the floor, the two going down together.

At this juncture the conductor and a brakeman came hopping in upon the scene.

"Here!" shouted the former, drawing his revolver with Southwestern promptitude; "fighting's not allowed on this train, unless I take a hand."

"Not even with a pickpocket?" coolly demanded the detective, calling attention to his dangling watch-chain as he nimbly rose. "You'll doubtless find my ticker in that galoot's possession. He's one of your Crescent City toughs, and his name is Jim Peters, otherwise the Royal Street Slob."

The discomfited tough began to roar out his protestations—and with private reason enough, since his alleged robbery was merely the result of a deft sleight-of-hand trick on his adversary's part—but without avail.

The missing watch was found upon him, and he was accordingly hustled forward into the baggage-car by the two officials, to be handed over to the authorities at the next station.

Peace having been restored, or rather preserved, Malone, who was more tickled than ever, secretly called the detective's attention to their companion.

The latter, instead of being painfully excited by the occurrence, as might well be apprehended, was positively jubilant in his taciturn, half-bewildered way, softly rubbing his thin hands together, his eyes still dancing, his entire aspect suggesting wholesome animation and internal glee.

"It's a foine sign, an' shows that he do be comin' around steady and in airnest," whispered Malone to the detective at the first opportunity. "But, what the deuce! how n'ately you managed the toof! How did you chance to recognize him for what he really is?"

"An old remembrance," replied Walden, indifferently. "But let us not relax our vigilance. The master-fiend of this deviltry may show his hand at any time."

"Trust to Pat Malone for sl'aping wid the two eyes of him open ivery toime, your Honor!"

As the train made its frequent stations the car began to fill up slowly, and when the conductor again came through, the detective inquired what detention a man would be likely to undergo who had intended to take the train they were on, but missed doing so.

"Less than an hour," was the reply. "He could take the regular Cincinnati Express, which is only that much behind us. It will pass us at the Bigbee Branch-off, where we stop for dinner, and will then cut off on the Northern Branch."

This announcement caused the detective more or less secret uneasiness, which he communicated to Malone by a look.

This would enable Blackley (on the supposition that he had not been too badly hurt by his tumble from the train, which was more than likely, as such rascals mostly fall on their feet), both to communicate with the Corpulent Mystery, his presumed principal, by telegraph, besides overtaking the train, from which he had been thrown at the place designated, which might mean any amount of further molestation ahead.

He was therefore watchfully alert at the Bigbee Branch-off, while his companions were in the restaurant, but with no result.

The Cincinnati Express made the cut-off there, it is true, and slowed up considerably in doing so, but he was quite certain no one quitted it at that point.

When the journey was resumed he even went through his own train from end to end, carefully scrutinizing every face, but without discovering a sign of Blackley, or any other suspicious character.

He signed to Malone that it was all right, so far, as he resumed his seat and fell to looking over a newspaper.

However, as night came on the train began to skirt the wild and rugged mountain region of Northern Georgia and East Tennessee.

Then, without an instant's warning, there was a tremendous halting shock, a splintering, a roar, a tumbling of some of the cars up and down like broken vessels at sea, a telescoping of others, shrieks, curses, moans, and all was wreck, ruin and despair.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

OUT OF THE JAWS OF DEATH.

THE car containing our trio of journeyers was pretty badly smashed and standing partly on one end, besides being in semi-darkness, the lamps and every other brittle article having been instantaneously demolished.

The detective struggled out of a mass of wreckage, to find himself but little hurt, and then, peering about anxiously for his companions without seeing them, loudly called them by name, though the cries of the battered and wounded passengers all around him mingled with his voice.

"Where are you?" he shouted at the top of his lungs, again calling the names. "And how are you?"

"Here!" at last responded a faint voice, which he recognized as the keeper's, from somewhere under the wreckage, just forward. "An' by the powers! if I could only get shut of this blackguard s'ate-back that's pinning me down, it's little the worse I am, either, to my thinking."

"Nor I, neither!" cheerily chirped another voice, doubtless Mr. Marling's. "Bless me! this is more of a sensation than we bargained for."

This was some encouragement out of discouragement, to say the least.

In a few minutes, by extraordinary exertions, Walden succeeded in releasing his companions, neither of whom seemed to have sustained any material injury.

"Hurrah!" cried the detective, delightedly.

"Mr. Marling, you are doing heroically. Don't leave go the gentleman's arm for a single minute, Malone. Now, try to follow me, both of you."

Groans and yells of suffering still resounded on every hand, but for the time being, at least, Walden could not pay any attention to these.

He slowly picked his way down the incline of the tilted and littered floor toward certain sounds that seemed to be produced by some one cutting through the side of the car with an ax, every now and then turning to make sure that his companions were close at his heels.

Once he stepped unwittingly upon the outstretched arm of an unconscious, perhaps lifeless form, and a fat woman who was caged by a mass of wreckage on his left vociferated tremendously to be taken out; but, shutting his ears and steeling his heart, he pressed on.

At last there was a rush of fresh, cold air, and there appeared a great gap, fringed with splintered glass, at the point in the side of the car for which he was aiming.

"Broken bridge!" he laconically queried of one of a group of axmen and others, as he climbed through the welcome aperture.

"Worse!" was the hurried rejoinder. "Obstructions on track at mouth of Eagle Pass!"

"Where are you, Malone?" called out Walden, looking around as his feet touched the hard ground outside.

"Here, sir!" was the cheery response, almost at his elbow. "Right as a trivet, and with the dear gentleman in tow."

But the air was full of escaping steam, all was chaos, with men hurrying this way and that, aimlessly or with some sort of system, and at this juncture a knot of burly figures, with one enormously stout but surprisingly active figure at their head, came surging down the steep, flinty ground alongside the wreck like a human landslide.

Walden had only time to glimpse this much—and with such emotion as can well be imagined—when he was swept, staggering, to one side, and when he recovered himself, his companions were no longer visible, while the knot of men had also in some manner disappeared, their place being occupied by the random crowd of a moment before.

"Malone!" cried the startled detective, fairly thundering forth the name.

"Here, sir!" And the keeper came staggering back to him through the steam and dusk, his face bleeding. "I hope you have Mr. Marling with you, sir?"

"With me? Good God, no!" cried the detective, all but appalled. "Have you lost him?"

Malone could only point to his face and stammer forth a few explanatory words.

The broad man in the van of the particularized rush of a few moments previous had given him a crushing jab with his elbow in passing, and then somehow the poor gentleman who had been clinging to his arm was missing.

"That 'broad man' was none other than Max Marling!" gasped the detective. "Quick! is your revolver ready?"

"Yes."

"Come on!"

And then the detective dashed down the steep decline, with Malone at his heels, the moonlight lightening up things as they passed from the immediate vicinity of the wreck.

There was a deep, narrow ravine to the left, where the moonbeams struggled fitfully down the rugged, pine-clad sides, into which he instinctively led the way.

A brook brawled over its stony bed down the center, and a sort of path which they were pursuing ran irregularly along one side of this.

Their speeding footfalls sent forth weird echoes, which reverberated impressively through the ghostly solitude of the narrow pass.

Midway down, in the direction of a point where the ravine seemed to broaden out indefinitely, two stalwart men—appearing in the dim light as a mixture of the outlaw and the mountaineer—sprung out to bar the way, revolver in hand.

"Stand!" sternly shouted the foremost, with an oath. "It is Chief Max's command that none shall pass without—"

There was an interruptive flash, a report, and the detective's bullet was in his brain—the words "Chief Max" having been sufficient to seal the ruffian's death-warrant.

Then Walden wheeled, as there was another report, almost like the echo of the first, and perceived the plucky Malone and the remaining mountaineer in a hand-to-hand grapple, the latter's shot having passed ineffectively over the Irishman's head.

Summarily deciding the contest by clapping his revolver to the ruffian's ear and blowing his brains out, Walden dragged Malone from under the prostrate form, and the mad pursuit was resumed, after an interruption that had lasted less than sixty seconds.

The ravine suddenly broadened out upon a wild mountain slope, down which the path, or semblance of a path as described in the moonlight, led slantingly in a zigzag form.

"Oh!" exclaimed the detective, still leading the way. "The giant chief is doubtless among his whilom adherents, and our patient is most likely already in his power."

Here there was a shot from below, and Malone stumbled slightly, with an exclamation of pain.

A dark figure had just emerged from the angle of a rock ten rods lower down, the smoke from a freshly-discharged rifle curling around it in the soft, poetic moonshine.

To snatch his tottering comrade under his left arm, throw out his right upon a snap-shot level, was the work of an instant on the part of the detective, and then he fired.

A snap-shot, but a true one!

The assassin-figure threw up its arms, plunged forward, and then went rolling down the path.

"Are you done for, Pat?" anxiously demanded Walden, coming to a momentary pause.

"No!" and Malone instantly rallied. "Divil more than a scratch, though it sickened me a bit at the start."

"On, then!"

Fifty rods further down, at a turn of the path, two figures stood motionless on a broad ledge overlooking a deep descent.

They were the mountainous-formed mesmerizer and Henry Marling, his old-time victim.

The former's quivering hand was outstretched, and the other was palpitatingly swaying from side to side in obedience to its power, like a doomed bird in the influence of a serpent's fascination.

Neither seemed conscious of a threatened interruption.

"See to the gentleman!" whispered the detective.

Then shouting out:

"Holdfast is a good dog still!" he hurled his revolver at the Mystery's head, and, darting forward like a bolt from a gun, hurled himself upon him with the force of an avalanche.

CHAPTER XL.

THE RESCUE.

INVINCIBLE as the master-villain might be ordinarily, when not absorbed in the prosecution of his baleful mesmeric power, it proved otherwise on this fateful occasion.

Over the brink of the ledge he toppled under the impetus of that tremendous shock, seemingly in the weird moonlight as a ponderous buffalo might have done with a lithe, thin-flanked panther fastened upon his throat.

Then there was a crash, showers of loose earth and stones, and both were plunging, rolling, rushing, tumbling inextricably down the precipice together.

The bulky ruffian landed at the bottom underneath, with a harsh metallic jar, like that of an enormous iron pot, sheathed in upholstery of some sort; and Wirt Walden had redeemed his reputation—was the Holdfast Detective still, for, even with that jarring shock, apparently shaking every bone in his body like so many dice in a box, he was still fastened like a burr to his massive enemy's prostrate form.

A wild joy seized upon the detective, and this was succeeded by exultation of a more practical nature.

He now for the first time saw that his motionless foe was in the ruffianly disguise by which he had thus far succeeded in defying identification; and the metallic sound given out by the shock had also been sufficiently suggestive.

"So!" exclaimed Walden, rising breathlessly and looking grimly down upon his fallen foe; "we'll now see if I shall not be able to swear to the identity of the pair of you, should another opportunity ever be vouchsafed me."

When about to begin the examination, however, a shot rung out from the top of the cliff, causing him to straighten up again.

"What is it?" he cried, anxiously calling up the face of the steep.

"I'm all right, if you are!" came down the answer in Malone's brogue. "Take your time, Misther Walden."

The detective then proceeded with his investigation, which quickly revealed the identity of the insensible chief of the Silver Gang with the elegantly ponderous Max Marling, alias Major Ludgate, otherwise the Corpulent Mystery.

In the first place, there was stripped off an entire false face, or mask, whiskers and all, made of rubber, or something of the sort, which had fitted to the real features beneath with consummate naturalness, and also doubtless accounted in some measure for the always noticeable whiteness and delicacy of the man's genuine complexion.

Then, together with the slouched hat, was lifted off the cleverest of wigs, and beneath that a cup-shaped steel cap, or close-fitting helmet, that was cause enough for the numerous otherwise stunning blows it had warded off from the normal skull of the wearer.

Lastly, the detective tore open the man's clothing, and assured himself of the long-suspected fact that the entire trunk was incased in a bullet-proof shirt of mail, deftly fabricated of chain-armor and silk interwoven, such as certain of the Saracen warriors are historically described as wearing in the battles of the Crusades.

Having completed these satisfactory revelations, the Holdfast Detective stood over the insensible form in mingled exultance and admiration.

Strange as it may seem, that motionless form, in spite of its enormous bulkiness and weight, did not betray a single ounce of really superfluous flesh.

All was sheer sinew and strength—a mountain of muscularity, so to speak—which sufficiently accounted for the all but incredible springiness and activity which had so strangely companioned its apparent unwieldiness.

Then came the self-query: Was this man dead, or only stunned?

Throughout the body's absolute motionlessness there had not appeared the least flutter of life thus far; and now the detective placed his hand over the heart without detecting the faintest indication of life beneath.

But should he not make sure? Hesitatingly, he drew his spare revolver, and placed its muzzle against the marble brow.

It was a self-cocker, and a touch of his finger would have made assurance doubly sure by sending a 44-caliber bullet crashing through the skull.

But somehow he couldn't do it. And at that instant Malone's voice was again heard calling down the precipice.

"Misther Walden!" it called.

"Well?"

"Couldn't you come up? I'm having some trouble with the poor gentleman."

"Right away!"

As the detective turned away to find the best mode of making his way back to the top of the steep down which he had come with such readiness and lack of deliberation, he remarked a mountain road winding off through the rugged valley from a point quite near at hand.

Regaining the upper ledge after no little difficulty, the detective found Malone very busy with trying to soothe his charge, who was in a wild flutter of excitement, and apparently on the verge of losing his senses again, if not partly in that condition already.

At their feet lay the dead body of a ruffian, a revolver still clinched in an out-thrown, lifeless hand.

"What is this?" demanded Walden, indicating the body with his foot.

"The last of the murderin' blackguards, I'm thinking," was the reply. "The blissed minute after you went over the rock at the big devil's throat, that gossoon snapped his pistol at the side of my head. But I was too quick for him with my barker, and there he is."

The detective turned the dead man's face up to the moonlight, and then rose with a start.

"It is Blackley!" he exclaimed. "He must have got on the same train with us again, after all."

"It's in Satan's coach that he'll be ridin' by this, then," observed Malone, philosophically. "But do take the other arm of the poor gentleman, Misther Walden. See how he trembles, and it's devil a word I can get out of him. Didn't the perfessor give you some sort of a dose for him against an emairgency of this sort?"

"Yes, now I think of it, he did," exclaimed Walden. "Hold on! Ah, here we are!"

He produced a small package, which contained a vial filled with a reddish liquid and a tiny silver cup.

"This is it," he continued. "I was to give half the contents of the vial as a sedative, and the remainder two hours later in the way of a soporific. Here! I hope he won't make a fuss about taking the stuff."

Fortunately, Mr. Marling made no difficulty on this score whatever, and after a short rest he

really seemed to be rapidly regaining his composure, though he remained very taciturn, and seemed dazed or frightened if not permitted to retain one or another of his companion's arms.

"We are doing well," said the detective. "But come, now, we must get to the bottom of the crag in some way. There's a pretty decent road down there that ought to lead us to some village or place of shelter for the time being."

They were so fortunate as to find a better way down than had served Walden in the ascent, but when they reached the spot where he and his late antagonist had struck earth in their tremendous tumble, a mysterious disappointment was awaiting them.

The form of the fallen giant had wholly disappeared.

Walden stamped his foot in mortification and chagrin.

"Tricked and duped!" he shouted, furiously. "The villain was only half-stunned or shamming altogether. Oh, what a fool I was not to make sure when my pistol was clapped to his cold forehead!"

"Whist!" cried Malone, consolingly. "Mebbe he was really dead—sure, an' the fall alone would have killed an elephant!—an' some more of the haythens have kerried the corpse away."

"Carried such a corpse away!" echoed the detective, derisively. "Half a dozen of 'em couldn't have managed it. No, no; he has carried himself away, and doubtless to make us fresh tragedy and misery! But come along. No use to whine over it now."

"Bedad, though!" observed the Irishman, as he followed along the road with Mr. Marling in tow; "but it's four dead devils they've left behind them in any case. And, accordin' to your own account, sir, the big-shouldered villain's double-d'alin' trick can be of no more use to him at all, at all, be he livin' or dead."

CHAPTER XLII.

CLOVEN-FOOT ONCE MORE.

THEY were presently so fortunate as to come to a large, but rude, farm-house, where they were speedily made welcome on its being understood that they were from the railroad disaster, which had already spread an immense sensation far and wide through those primitive mountain communities.

The farmer's name was Brownell, and the best of his accommodations were afforded the wanderers, without question, at first.

But after supper, and when Mr. Marling had been put comfortably to bed, with the faithful Malone on guard over him, the farmer beckoned the detective to take a seat in the family circle that was gathered around the great hearth, back of which a huge back-log was blazing merrily, and indicated by his manner that there was something heavy on his mind.

"These are wild parts, sir," he said, hesitatingly, "and folks are naturally suspicious hereabouts. Therefore, mister, would you mind answering a few questions that happen to come to my mind?"

No attempt is made to reproduce the backwoods dialect of the farmer and his family, though it was characterized by a picturesque and graphic flavor that was all his own.

"With all my heart, sir," replied Walden, with much geniality, that seemed to make an agreeable impression on the group as a starter. "And perhaps I'll have a conundrum or two to propound on my own account, with your kind permission," smiling. "Cut right in to me without ceremony!"

"Your name be Mr. Walden, ye say, sir?"

"It is."

"What might your business be, sir?"

"I am a New York police detective."

"Whew!" and Farmer Brownell gave a low whistle, while there was an interested stir among the farmer's wife, three daughters and as many sons composing the family circle. "A p-o-l-i-c-e d-e-t-e-c-t-i-v-e, eh? and all the way from New York?"

"Exactly."

"An' those two others with you—the invalider gent and the Irisher?"

Walden briefly explained.

"Now, mister," continued the farmer, "you won't be riled if I continue a trifle suspicious-like, will you?"

"Not at all."

"Then please to say how you happened to git onto this back road, if you were really passengers on that knocked-up railroad train, two mile over yonder in Eagle Pass?"

"All in good time. But pray first inform me why you are suspicious."

The farmer exchanged an uneasy glance with his sons, and then, looking askance at the long rifles that hung on their pegs over the chimney-piece, he blurted out:

"Stranger, it's just this way: There's rumors abroad that Big Max an' some of his murderin' gang is 'round here ag'in from over the mountains in Virginia. That's what's the difficulty. An' my son Jake here, who has just come in from the smash-up, says it's the general impression that some of them devils caused it by obstructin' the track fur the sake of the plunder. There you be!" with a long breath.

"Oho! Who is this Chief Max, pray! A robber?"

"He's a hound—a devil from hell!" roared the farmer; and then, in response to numerous apprehensive looks from the others, he modified his voice and manner not a little, adding half-sullenly, half-fearfully: "That is, they say he be, stranger, and— Well, goldarn it!" flaring up again; "our firelocks is all right if he ain't a mind to leave us alone."

This was enough for the detective.

"Look here, friends," he cried, "I'll now explain to you freely enough the seeming inconsistency of my companions and myself being on this back road. Listen."

He then briefly sketched the adventures of his party and himself from the time of their quitting the asylum up to their arrival at the farm-house, together with affording his auditors some notion of his New York experience in connection with "Chief Max."

If the family had been profoundly interested before, they were now simply amazed.

"Jeewhiz!" cried the farmer; "all this sounds like a story-book. Here, Jake, you and Tom take a lantern an' run back to the mounting, what this gentleman seems to have been makin' a graveyard of. Take a look at the or'nery cusses he's laid, an' see if you know any of 'em. Then come back here an' report. Jeewhiz!"

The young men lost no time in obeying their instructions, and then the detective (now such a hero, even on his own account, as had doubtless never been met with in those parts before) willingly enhanced the family wonder by recounting other of his adventures, besides good-naturedly answering such questions as could be picked out for special consideration from among the dozens that were promiscuously showered upon him from all sides.

True, some of the questions would have been laughable under different circumstances. As instances, when the good wife gravely asked if New York might be as big and busy a place as Knoxville; when Polly Brownell, the beauty of the family, wondered if "calikers" and big hoop-skirts were worn as much at balls and parties in New York as 'round about Eagle Pass, and so on. But Walden managed to satisfy them all; and at last, when the two young men returned with a full confirmation of his story concerning his prowess, though neither of them had been able to identify the bodies of the slain ruffians, his reputation was at the topmost pinnacle in the family estimation.

He was at last shown to bed in a room adjoining the one given up to Mr. Marling and the keeper, and, completely worn out, was soon sound asleep.

He was awakened, as a clock in one of the lower rooms was striking three in the morning, by the farmer standing by his bedside, candle in hand.

The latter's eldest son Jake stood by his side, with his rifle on his arm.

"What's up?" asked Walden, at once sitting up wide-awake.

"Stranger," said the old man, cautiously and apologetically, "I do hate to disturb you, but—there's trouble!"

"But what is it?"

"That murdering villain, Chief Max—"

The detective was out of bed at a bound, dressing himself coolly but with the utmost dispatch, and examining his revolvers.

"You are a good one!" observed the farmer, admiringly.

"Nonsense! give me the particulars of this alarm."

"Good enough! You've perhaps heard of the devil showing the cloven foot when even half-burned to death with his own fire?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's the trouble. Come along!"

CHAPTER XLII.

BREATHING FREELY AT LAST.

"HOLD on!" said the detective, coming to a pause before the door of the adjoining room as they were about to lead the way down-stairs. "Have you notified my companions in here?"

"Not yet," replied Brownell.

"Come in, then," and he opened the door, and entered.

Mr. Marling was in bed sleeping peacefully, while Malone started up from a deerskin lounge upon which he had been sleeping with his clothes on.

"Look here!" said the detective, speaking softly to his three companions—after the matter had been briefly explained to Malone—so as not to disturb Mr. Marling; "what is the exact situation? Do you apprehend an attack on the house by these outlaws?"

Farmer Brownell nodded.

"Well, our sleeping charge here," with a nod toward the bed and a window adjoining it, "must not be left alone for a single minute, in any event."

The farmer intimated that the "Irisher" might continue in his capacity of guard over the invalid, but promised Malone that, if there was to be a scrimmage, he wouldn't be left out of it.

"I'll tell you what we'll do," suggested the farmer. "My three darters shall stand sentry

over the poor gentleman. There ain't one of 'em but can shoot, and they're all just death on squallin', while Polly has even downed her b'ar-meet with Jake's rifle."

After some reflection, Walden agreed to this, and the young women were forthwith placed on duty there, each armed with a rusty old fire-lock, which still seemed serviceable, however.

The others then proceeded down-stairs, where the two younger sons were found silently alert, rifle in hand, their mother being armed with a shotgun.

It was not an unusual thing, this sort of night alarm, among these rude mountain folk where both outlawry and family feuds were so prevalent.

The present situation was just this: Half an hour before, when one of the girls was astir, strange men had been seen lurking along the edge of the neighboring forest, while one figure especially had suggested the presence of Chief Max himself, and the latter and his band were known to be cherishing a grudge against the Brownells from 'way back. It was also more than probable that the outlaws were aware, through their spies, of accommodations having been furnished the travelers.

"But the best part of it all is this," whispered Brownell—all conversation had been thus conducted, and even the lights were kept down to a minimum since the inception of the alarm: "One of that gang must be Abe Johnson, who was with 'em before, an' who hates us Brownells like pizen. Unlike the rest of Chief Max's gang, he lives hereabouts, and has only jined in with 'em as they'd chance to come in over the border. Now all us men-folks have been away from home a good deal of nights lately, along of the huntin' season, an' Abe is of the 'pinion that we're still likely to be away, leavin' the women-folks here alone; fur Polly overheard him say so at the station store only yesterday mornin'. See?"

The others nodded, and at that instant, without warning, there came a thundering knock on the door, which opened directly out from the large living-room in which the family forces were silently mustered.

At a sign from her husband, Mrs. Brownell demanded who was there.

"Is your husband indoors, ma'am?" called out a rough voice, which a series of nods intimated as belonging to the scapegrace, Abe Johnson.

"No," replied the farm-wife, in response to another significant sign, while the men silently held themselves in readiness. "Is that you, Abe Johnson?"

"Yes," after a hesitant pause.

"Then you make tracks from here, you hear me! You ought to be 'shamed of yourself, makin' this fuss at this time of the mornin', even afore cock-crow, knowin', as you order know, that neither my husband nor any of the boys are to hum."

"Oho!" cried the voice; "is that so, Marm Brownell?"

"Yes."

"Well, look here, there's a hull gang of us, an' we're bound to come in."

"What fur?"

"You've given shelter to a sickly old gentleman, sort o' weak in the top story, hev'n't you?"

"Well, what if we hev'?"

"Whar's the two men what was with the sick man?"

"Gone on funder, I reckon," at another sign from the farmer. "We don't keep no hotel here, with all the men-folks away from hum."

"Look here, Marm Brownell, we want that sick man."

"What fur?"

"Never you mind that. Jest you open this door or we'll bu'st it in, besides mebbe hev'in' some fun with you and the gals."

The old farmer silently gritted his teeth, while a new sternness came into the strong faces of his stalwart sons.

"Go along, Abe Johnson, or you'll rue it!" cried out the farm-wife. "I've got one of the old firelocks left, an' won't submit to no door of mine bein' bu'sted in."

"Open, I tell you!" roared the voice.

"See you funder first!"

Then a number of voices were heard in consultation, freely mixed with epithets and oaths. Immediately following this there was a crash, the door flew from its hinges, and a villainous crew came crowding in through the entrance.

At that instant, however, every firearm on the part of the defenders—including Mrs. Brownell's shotgun, which was loaded with buck-shot—spoke with tremendous effect.

There was a series of yells, and such of the ruffians as were left standing reeled back in a panic, while the defenders darted after them with a slogan of victory.

But at this juncture there was a scream from up-stairs, followed by several shots.

"Remain here, Malone!" cried the detective, as he bounded up the stairs.

As he entered Mr. Marling's chamber, Chief Max was seen half-way in through the window, while the young women were clustered together, greatly frightened after managing to fire off their old guns at random.

Firing shot after shot at the intruder with his revolver, Walden rushed toward him; but almost instantly the huge form of the villain disappeared into the outer darkness with a muttered curse.

Several of the men came up-stairs from below, reporting the battle to be over in that quarter.

Mr. Marling had slept undisturbed throughout, which was doubtless due to the remainder of the potion that had been administered before his retirement.

"We're all right now, I reckon," observed Farmer Brownell, in a pleasant tone. "Leastwise, there's some work for the coroners down-stairs, besides a wounded cuss or two."

Malone resumed his post, while the rest returned to the lower room.

Five dead men lay at the threshold, including "Abe Johnson," and three more, who were found mortally wounded outside, died before daybreak.

It was a lively breakfast in the Brownell homestead several hours later, after the coroner, a constable's posse and various sightseers had made their visit, and no traces were left of the tragedy.

Not the least feature in this jubilation was the fact of Mr. Marling being present, to all appearances entirely restored mentally from the shocks he had sustained, though very feeble physically.

The farewells that followed were of a heartiness and whole-souledness that can better be imagined than described.

But it may be mentioned that just as the travelers were about to start for the station behind one of the farmer's teams, handsome Miss Polly requested a private parting with the detective.

"Mister," she avowed with charming artlessness when they were alone, "I can't part with you—and I know it's forever—without telling you that you're jest the purtiest and the bravest man what ever stood in boots or drewed a gun. I love you clean through, mister, and here's a keepsake I want you to remember me by. God bless you!"

Tears were in her fine eyes, and her emotion was genuine.

She kissed him with quivering lips, pressed a little package into his hand, and was gone.

The package contained only a prettily-worked cushion, but it will ever remain one of Wirt Walden's most cherished possessions. Moreover, he never laughs nor even smiles when he looks at it.

CHAPTER XLIII.

CLEARING SKIES.

THE disaster at Eagle Pass had been a dreadful one, but the tracks had been cleared, and another train was in readiness by the time our travelers reached the station.

They duly reached their destination without further mishap or misadventure.

Here Mr. Marling was placed under Malone's charge in a modest Harlem hotel, while Walden lost no time in making his report to Headquarters.

This was in the early afternoon of the day, and the detective had been absent from the city just seven days.

Inspector Byrnes, upon hearing his report, complimented him as he deserved, and then said:

"We must be nearing the end of this remarkable, if not unprecedented, complication. I have succeeded in placing four more of the Silver Gang under arrest, with a good chance for their conviction, during your absence. Though two or three of the rank and file may be still at liberty, as an organization the Gang is a thing of the past. And, of course, your ability to now establish the identity of their leader will soon place him in our power."

"Should he return to New York, yes," was the reply. "But do you think he will venture to do so?"

"I do without a doubt," rejoined the inspector, confidently. "Such a man will not be able to forego the vicious fascination of New York's criminal life for a month, after having once fairly reveled in it. Besides that, owing to his exceptional powers, his confidence in himself is doubtless but little diminished. I shouldn't wonder if he were back in his old haunts inside of a week."

"I only hope so."

"What shall you do now?" The detective had turned to go. "Of course, you are at liberty to make your own programme to the end of this affair."

"I think I shall first take a look for Miss Marling, though I am not yet certain as to the best way of bringing the father and daughter together."

"You will not find her at the Hardman offices then, but in Harlem."

"What! has she lost her place?"

"By no means, but is on temporary furlough, I believe."

"Sickness?"

"That is the excuse, but I rather think that her private mystery is occupying all of her time."

"Ah, I must see to that. Have you made

any discoveries on your own part in that line, inspector?"

"No, because I haven't cared to; though, of course, I have my impression. Go along then, Walden."

Proceeding directly to the neighborhood of Rose Marling's residence, the detective was hesitating over the best course to pursue, when, to his astonishment, he saw her walking toward the house, with the "Mystery's" wrist through her arm.

There was a noble sorrow—almost a defiance—in her face and mien, as if she had at last resolved to no longer make a secret of her misery.

One glance at the figure she was supporting—a slow-paced, feeble, gray-haired figure, with bowed head, listless, half-peevish carriage, an emaciated face and transparent hands, upon which death had already set his prophetic mark—was sufficient for the detective, who was thereupon at once stricken with wonder that he had not suspected the truth from the first.

He slipped out of sight as the strange pair approached, but there was little need.

The young woman scarcely looked away from her pitiful charge.

The latter suddenly stopped as they reached the house entrance, and, with a weak little cry, pressed his hand to his heart.

Rose looked at him in a sort of terror, and then, with a paling cheek, grasped his wasted form in her strong arms, and fairly carried him into the house.

The detective waited long enough to perceive the kind-hearted janitor assisting her on the stairs with her helpless charge, and then hurried away.

"Idiot that I have been not to have suspected it!" he muttered to himself. "But it has been said, and not unwisely, that we professionals who deal so constantly in mysteries as a business, are the more likely to miss the simplest clues and deductions on that very account—through a sort of satiety, I suppose. By Jupiter! I wonder if the chief has suspected this all along, while laughing in his sleeve at me."

Mr. Hardman and his nephew were both in their place of business as the detective entered.

The former seemed to be treasuring a good share of his righteous indignation over the still recent conversion of his office into a burglar-trap—a "bear pit" or "slaughter-pen," as he still persisted in characterizing it, and not without reason in all conscience.

But the detective was exceptionally polite and agreeable on this occasion, and when he had given them a brief sketch of his scarcely paralleled experiences since parting with them, even the old merchant's grumpiness gave way to wonder and admiration, while Horace Allen was scarcely less amazed.

"So you have really Rose's unfortunate father home with you at last?" cried Mr. Hardman, when the story was told.

"But didn't you suspect that he was already with her, and that this constituted his recent exclusiveness and distraction?"

"I am obliged to confess that I did."

"Humph! So did we toward the last. Where is the poor gentleman now?"

"In charge of his faithful keeper, or nurse, at a quiet hotel not far from Miss Marling's residence."

"And his mental condition?"

"Is almost completely restored, though he is still more or less dazed occasionally, and, physically, he is very feeble."

"Why don't you take him to his daughter at once?"

"It is for the purpose of having you go with me to do so—both of you—that I am now here. And, as a preliminary to that business, I propose to make you acquainted with Miss Marling's private mystery, or side-issue in this web of curious complications, as I think we can call it."

"But what does it consist of?" inquired the merchant, though not without a suspicion of the truth; while his nephew also looked up eagerly.

"Excuse me," replied the detective; "but I prefer that you should judge for yourselves."

They at once accompanied him.

But when they finally arrived before the door of Rose's little private hall-passage, they paused in no small embarrassment, for there was a low sound of sobbing in one of the rooms.

At that moment, however, Mrs. Spotswood suddenly appeared at the door, unannounced, her eyes red with weeping, her lips still quivering.

"Dear madam," said Horace Allen, "we sympathize with you in your evident trouble. But pray ask Rose—Miss Marling—to admit us."

She tried to look at them sternly, but her tears started afresh, and she blurted out:

"He is dying!"

The men were much moved.

"Who is dying?" demanded the merchant.

"Oh, I can't tell!" the woman sobbed. "You—you would want to arrest him!"

"Arrest him?"

But here Rose Marling herself came to the door, with her brave but grief-tortured face.

A glance at the sympathetic visitors—first at the detective, then at the others—seemed to acquaint her with the true situation.

"Come in!" she said, with a forlorn composure. "He—he will be beyond your reach soon."

They followed her, and a moment later were mutely gathered at the bedside of—the pitiable boy criminal and fugitive, Ralph Marling.

CHAPTER XLIV.

SUNSHINE THROUGH THE STORM.

A COMPREHENSIVE glance or two explained the simple adjuncts of the pathetic 'mystery' which the brave unhappy young woman had thus far succeeded in preserving more or less exclusively to herself.

A glance that comprehended the wasted, dying form of the folly-ruined boy, the gray wig and other features of poor disguise that were visible on the dressing-case, Rose's woeful aspect, the sobbing elderly woman, the grave-featured physician in attendance—that was all.

An eloquent enough story, and without the need of words in the telling.

Wasted by a swift whirlwind of dissipation, enfeebled in body, broken in spirit, doubtless penniless as well, he had skulked home to die in the brave, tender arms that had been his shield from the first, and would so gladly have been uninterruptedly to the end, but for the perverse folly and self-sufficiency that had so remorselessly marked the young life for their own!

Such was the wordless story of the affecting scene.

Mr. Hardman looked inquiringly at the physician, and was answered by a look whose verdict there was no mistaking.

Ralph had flushed up painfully at perceiving the visitors.

He tried to hold out one of his transparent hands appealingly to Mr. Hardman, but the effort was too much for him.

"I took the money, sir—the thousand-dollar package!" he said in a voice so weak that it was scarcely audible. "I took it—I was the thief!"

The old merchant cleared his throat, and seemed to be swallowing something with difficulty.

"But oh, sir!" the weak little voice went on; "you won't have 'em arrest me, will you?—at least, not quite yet—not till I'm a little stronger and better, I hope!"

"No, no!" all but roared out Mr. Hardman—perhaps as something of a mask for his feelings, as old sailors and soldiers are said to swear horribly at times with a similar end in view. "Good God! who is thinking of arresting you, my poor boy? Here!" and he grasped the thin hand in his.

"What! you—you don't mean to say you forgive me—you?"

"Of course, I do, with all my heart!" patting the wasted hand, and then relinquishing it. "There, there! Brace up and try to get well."

Ralph shook his head, and then smiled faintly as Horace and Walden also took his hand one after the other.

But presently he turned and looked up into Rose's suffering face as trustingly as an infant might do to its mother, while listlessly fondling the hand that she had slipped into his.

After that he turned again to the others, with a look in which his old puerile cynicism was blended with a suggestion of exasperation and self-contempt.

"Isn't it a cursed shame," he gasped, "that Rose should have a thief for a brother?"

"Ralph!" cried his sister, in mingled grief and reproof.

Then, with a wild cry, she caught him in her arms, for a significant change had come into his face, and his eyes were closing.

Mrs. Spotswood, who had quitted the apartments shortly before, here returned, accompanied by a clergyman.

Then they silently waited while the spirit of Ralph Marling slowly took its flight.

It was tacitly agreed among the detective and his companions that it would not be best to acquaint Rose of her father's recovery and restoration at this time.

At the first opportunity Mr. Hardman spoke with the physician apart.

"I wish to inform myself as to Miss Marling's circumstances," he said, going straight to the point.

"She has insisted on paying me for my professional visits day by day as they have occurred," was the reply. "I have reason to believe that she has some little of her savings left, but very little."

"Please tell her, after I shall have gone, that I will see an undertaker at once, and arrange for everything on my own responsibility and assure her that any objections on her part to my doing so will be utterly useless. You will oblige me by doing this?"

"With pleasure, sir."

A little later on, when the trio were about quitting the little parlor adjoining the death-chamber, Rose turned her tear-stained face to Horace and held out her hand helplessly.

"You would have me remain?" eagerly exclaimed the young man, in a low voice.

"If you will."

The detective accompanied Mr. Hardman to an undertaker's, where the necessary orders were given, and arrangements made for the burial in an extra plot belonging to the merchant in Woodlawn Cemetery.

"You are generous," the detective could not help observing, as they were about to separate.

"Pish! the girl is one in a million. Besides, it's as plain as the nose on one's face that Horace sooner or later—Tut, tut! Where are you going, allow me to ask?"

"To see how my patient is doing."

"Ah! the poor gentleman?"

"Of course."

Mr. Hardman consulted his watch.

"I wonder if you would mind my going with you?"

"On the contrary, I should like to have you, sir."

Mr. Marling was found to be improving rapidly, and Malone was no longer under any apprehension that there would ever be any relapse into mental infirmity.

The patient had already been taken on a long drive, and the two were playing draughts together when the visitors were announced.

The two older men seemed to be agreeably impressed with each other, and were soon chatting together in a most friendly and confidential way.

On being asked if he would be likely to enter business life again, however, Mr. Marling hesitated in his reply, and seemed not a little perturbed.

"I merely asked," observed Mr. Hardman, "because it occurred to me that, in the event of your ultimately determining to take up practical business again, I would be both willing and able to assist you materially."

"Thank you, sir, thank you!" exclaimed Mr. Marling, most gratefully. "But, you see, I will naturally want to deliberate, and," with a nervous laugh, "to a man who is practically penniless, that means more than first appears. It is true," again growing troubled, "I begin to revive a remembrance of having intrusted a certain package of papers to my daughter's care, the discovery of which would make a vast amount of difference in my future prospects. But it is scarcely credible that she should have been able to retain possession of them, especially if that devil, Max Marling," his voice trembled and his eyes blazed, "could have suspected their existence, which is more than likely."

The detective looked up eagerly, but the merchant gave him a quietly significant look.

"To what did these important papers refer, sir, if you will permit the question, Mr. Hardman?"

"Permit? Of course, of course! They referred chiefly to the ownership of valuable railroad stocks, which were a part of my wife's fortune left to me in trust for our children, and which had never been used in my speculations, that I am told resulted so disastrously through that villain's scoundrelism when I was no longer on hand to protect my interests."

"Ah! and these papers would enable you to establish your ownership of the stock in behalf of your children?"

"Indisputably. Besides, there were yet others, referring to certain discoveries, or suspicions, newly formed, as to the manner in which my foster-brother was forging my name and misusing my confidence as he perceived growing upon me the mental alienation that must so unexpectedly have overpowered me at last."

"Be of good heart!" cried Mr. Hardman, heartily. "The precious papers are still intact in your daughter's custody, or rather in my office safe!"

CHAPTER XLV.

BRIGHTENING DAYS.

THIS announcement had a most beneficially stimulating effect upon Mr. Marling.

He brightened up wonderfully, much of the harassed, humiliated look in his aspect disappeared, and he seemed altogether like a new man.

"It is more than I have dared to hope for!" he exclaimed. "Ah, my dear friend, what do I not owe to your kindness?" And he shook hands over again with both the merchant and the detective most fervently. "But look you, what of my children? You do not bring them to me, you have not even made mention of them. I really do not understand."

It was decided to tell him of Ralph's death on the spot, and this was accordingly done as carefully as possible, and of course with no reference to the unhappy circumstances attendant upon the event.

The announcement was received with more fortitude than might have been expected, and the poor gentleman even came to submit, after a little, to the proposition that, for Rose's sake, his reunion with his daughters should be deferred until after the funeral, perhaps two days thence.

In the mean time, Malone was left with private instructions to spare no expense in diverting the convalescent's mind from any chance brooding over melancholy and exasperating themes, and both Mr. Hardman and Walden promised to call frequently in the interim.

"Oen, out he's doing foinely!" the keeper managed to intimate to them as they were taking their departure. "The dear man has already the devil's own appetite, and with a couple of nights of foine, undisturbed rest he ought to be able to jump over a house and argue a pint with a church deacon."

On separating from Mr. Hardman, the detective lost no time in hastening to his chief with his latest news.

"All seems to be coming out nicely," observed the inspector. "As for the boy's death, it is probably a good thing all around, as I knew it would be from the first."

"From the first?"

"Of course."

"Look here, inspector! do you mean to tell me that you suspected Miss Marling was keeping her brother under cover all this time?"

The inspector laughed.

"Why, of course I did!" he admitted.

"Even after I had told you of catching a glimpse of that gray-haired head on the pillow, through the fanlight?"

"Even then."

"Then why the deuce didn't you tell a fellow?"

Byrnes laughed again and eyed him quizzically.

"Look here, Walden," he went on, "do I look like the man to destroy a beautiful young lady's pet mystery that even one of the shrewdest detectives on my staff is incontinently puzzled over? And besides, there's nothing like giving a free rein to fellows like you now and then. It helps to take the conceit out of them."

Walden, however, looked so humiliated that the inspector continued:

"Brace up, my boy! In spite of your short-sightedness in this minor affair, you have recovered your holdfast reputation pretty thoroughly."

"No, no!" cried the detective, disconsolately; "even that satisfaction is not yet mine by right. Oh, if I had only made sure of that devil's lieutenant when I had my revolver clapped against his apparently lifeless brow!"

"You are borrowing unnecessary trouble," remarked the inspector, consolingly. "For my part, I am glad—that is, rather glad—you didn't quite finish the villain in just that way; for I am still in fine hopes of fitting him up for the hangman's services."

"What! even with what you remember of his occult power, as was illustrated even here in this very room?"

Byrnes's brow darkened.

"Yes," he exclaimed, between his set teeth, "even when remembering that."

Here there was an opportune interruption caused by the entrance of Inspector Williams.

He had already heard the story of the detective's Southern adventures, and cordially congratulated him.

"By the way, though," he added, "you are back none too soon."

"What do you refer to, inspector?" asked Walden.

"To the Corpulent Mystery, as a matter of course."

"But what of him?"

"Back in New York."

"You don't mean it?"

"Yes; he has been seen, but is keeping mighty close, so far."

"Didn't I tell you, Walden," interposed Byrnes, "that the fellow would be unable to keep away from New York?"

"Yes; but I really can't understand his foolhardiness."

"It isn't that so much as necessity, I fancy," observed Williams. "There's still his chance of hocus-pocusing you—or let us say mesmerizing you—on the witness-stand. And, besides, I rather think he will not venture to show himself for quite a bit."

"Then why should he have the temerity to venture back at all?"

"Doubtless to work up what rags and tags remain of his Silver Gang, for like enough he is gone broke. But then we'll have to give him lee-way for awhile. He might even offer to turn State's evidence against the rascals that we've already got in hand."

"Not he! But how did you learn of his return, inspector?"

"He was seen on Sixth avenue a short time ago," replied Williams, evasively. "But you needn't look so glum, Walden. I'll still leave him to you."

"Thank you, inspector."

"And when we do get ready to have him here again," interposed Byrnes, softly, "I rather think I shall test his mesmeric powers to the full, besides giving him a chance in our fa-reducer."

Williams looked up with a laugh.

"The sweater, eh?"

Byrnes nodded.

Then the detective turned to go.

"Where now?" inquired his chief.

"To look after my patient."

"Pshaw! Ludgate won't give you any more trouble in that quarter, at least not for some time to come."

"Thanks; but I don't propose to take any risks." And Walden accordingly withdrew.

It was dusk when he stepped out of the Headquarters building.

Horace Allen was just about entering it in search of him.

"How is the young lady, sir?" asked the detective, after determining to say nothing of his last startling piece of news.

"She is bearing up bravely," was the reply. "To-morrow is Sunday, and I have persuaded her to set Monday morning for the funeral."

"That is well; but you haven't intimated anything of her father's presence in the city?"

"Not a word, but when shall the two be brought together?"

"I should advise some time Monday evening, when she shall have in some measure recuperated from this shock, which must be profound in one of her disposition."

"That is best. She suffers from this bereavement more than we can know. Were it not for this, I should advise that she be taken to her father at once."

"That would never do. It would not be wise, in view of Mr. Marling's continued weakness. Your uncle will explain it more fully, for he has already talked with the gentleman. Besides, in case of fresh danger—"

Horace caught the alarm.

"How can there be fresh danger?" he demanded uneasily. "And why do you so suddenly hesitate?"

"The deuce! for no reason at all. Of course, there can be nothing new to fear." And the detective hurriedly wished the young man a good-evening.

On his way back to the hotel where Mr. Marling was, and where he intended to share Malone's charge until the very last, Walden had to pass through a short, dark little street not far from Mount Morris Square.

As he was doing so, he suddenly experienced a sort of electric shock, and then grasped a railing for support.

Then a sort of despair possessed him, as he recognized the subtle, paralyzing influence of the arch-criminal's mysterious, invisible power.

Yes, there could be no doubt. Even as he clung there, all but transfixed, there was a voice in his ear—a faraway, baleful voice—though no visible presence to which it could have belonged.

"Be not too confident in the hour of your triumph!" hissed the bodiless voice. "Dog of a detective! Henry Marling and his daughter are henceforth secure from enmity of mine. It is you, and you alone, who shall feel my vengeance, and in good time."

CHAPTER XLVI.

LAST ANXIETIES.

THE detective made a great effort to shake off the spell that was upon him, but in vain.

"Ha, ha, ha!" softly laughed the mysterious voice. "Fool! you had me 'dead' once; why did you not make sure of me?"

Walden, petrified as he was, could in some way reply, though he scarcely recognized his own speech; which seemed to come out of him without any effort of the articulatory organs—if indeed the words were an actuality.

"Would to God I had!" he murmured. "But this is only a weakness—a trick of my own senses!"

"Not so. It is I, your mortal enemy, that am even now holding you spell-bound in my subtle power. And I have sworn to have your life—the sole object that now brings me back to the metropolis."

"Then why do you not take my life, if that is your object, and you have me in your power?"

"Because I am not here in body, but only in voice, in spirit—in the bold spirit of the fiend that is my inner self. But do not hug yourself with the delusive hope that you can escape my vengeance. It will strike—strike home, and soon!"

The voice seemed to be dying away into the distance—somewhere to the southward, it seemed—and then all was still.

Walden experienced a slight, jerking sort of a shock.

Then he was himself again, and alone—not even a chance passer-by on the lonely street, nor a lurking-place that could have afforded any concealment to the owner of that far-whispering and deadly voice.

"What devil's glamour is on me?" he muttered, shaking himself. "Of course, it was all my fancy, perhaps superinduced by exhaustion, but—but somehow I do feel as if I had been bewitched!"

He hurried to the hotel, to find Mr. Marling sleeping peacefully, after a hearty supper, and the faithful Malone watching by his bed.

"I'll keep watch with you, Malone," said the detective, abruptly. "That's a lazy-looking lounge yonder, to say nothing of these great easy-chairs. We ought to manage comfortably between us by taking turns in keeping awake."

The keeper stared at him.

"Faith, sir!" he exclaimed; "why should you put yourself out in this way, and yourself tired

out with the blackguard railroad an' its jolting, and without special made of it, at all, at all?"

"I should be no more worn out than you," and the detective made himself comfortable in one of the easy-chairs.

"But I'm used to this sort of thing, Mither Walden, and you're not."

"No matter. I've made up my mind, and here I stick."

Malone looked at him sharply, and then laid a hand on the other's arm with a startled air.

"Sure, an' is it frish alarm you've taken for the poor gentleman's sake, sir?" he queried, under his breath.

Walden shook his head, with an indifferent shrug of the shoulders.

"Och, but tell me the truth, sir! The murderin' big fellow—that devil's necromancer! he's not tracking the poor gentleman again?"

"Nonsense! what an idea! See here, I'll take the first catnap, and in say two hours you shall have your snatch at the sweet restorer. What do you say?"

Malone nodded assent, and resumed the book he had been perusing by a small reading-lamp, though he was by no means other than outwardly satisfied.

As for Walden, he stretched out his legs, let his head fall back, and closed his eyes, for in very truth he was greatly exhausted.

Before dropping off, however, he remembered to have vaguely congratulated himself that, in any event, the chief danger from a resumption of the Corpulent Mystery's machinations would most likely concern himself alone, rather than Miss Marling or her father, after which he sunk into deep, dreamless sleep.

Waking promptly at the end of the two hours, which from long practice he was able to do to a minute, he found Malone still reading, though with a constant watch upon the bed, whose occupant was still sleeping peacefully.

"Your turn, old fellow!" said the detective, softly, taking the book out of the Irishman's hands. "I'll take care of this for you."

Malone made no objection, but went to sleep almost at once, after refusing to occupy the lounge, on the ground that what was good enough for Walden should be good enough for him.

The book was an interesting detective novel, and Walden speedily interested himself with his ready adaptability to circumstances.

He permitted the keeper to sleep out double his time—four hours, instead of two—and when the latter awoke of his own accord only laughed at his remonstrances.

It was three in the morning when he again leaped back his head and stretched out his legs for his second draught at the fountain of oblivion.

He was next awakened, an hour or so later, by a sort of gasping sound.

It was from Malone, who was sitting bolt upright in his chair, his face bloodless, his hair on end, his lips shrunk back so as to show his teeth, his eyes popping out of his head and staring at vacancy, though it might have been at some phantasmagoria of the inner sight, some blood-curdling horror of the air.

And Mr. Marling, broad awake and sitting up in bed, was likewise glaring in the same direction, though with perhaps more of fascination than horror.

The Irishman seemed incapable of speech, or of any utterance save that hoarse, gasping sound; but the invalid was muttering audibly:

"Again, again, and yet again? The beckoning hand, the quivering fingers, the nameless thrill! Speak, then, speak, Max! What is it you would have? What is it I must do?"

The detective started to spring to his feet, but was met, as it were, by a wave of invisible dismay, and remained transfixed himself.

And then what was it that seemed filling the room through the secured windows, the closed and fastened door.

It was simply indescribable, save as a sense of horror, a consciousness of diabolism, and over and through it all a growing, nauseating redolence as of the smell of fresh human blood.

Suddenly the keeper rose bristlingly from his seat and started for the door.

"Save me, Walden, save me!" he croaked out, rather than articulated. "It's after me, it's after me!"

The detective summoned up the combative forces of his will power as never before.

And for the first time under like conditions was he successful.

He burst through the mysterious horror of it, and was free.

"Stop where you are, Malone, on your life!" he thundered, bounding from his chair.

The next instant, after hurling back the keeper, he was at and through the door, revolver in hand.

Nothing to be seen outside any more than within—nothing but the long, fairly lighted hotel corridor, stretching away on either side, and affording nowhere the least chance for a lurker to be concealed.

But his action had snapped the charm, the spell, or whatever it might be called, and when he reentered the room, closing and refastening

the door behind him, all was as commonplace and devil-free, so to speak, as before.

Mr. Marling had fallen back upon his pillows, and was lying perfectly still, with closed eyes.

Malone was on his knees by his chair, a crucifix in his hands, a fluttering of prayer upon his lips.

CHAPTER XLVII.

FATHER AND CHILD.

WALDEN felt a strange, new thrill of exultation. He had yet once again encountered the mesmeric *diablerie*, the invisible will-fiend, or howsoever the thing might best be designated, and, instead of surrendering to it as theretofore, he had conquered.

He waited a moment, and then, going up to Malone, shook him roughly by the shoulder.

The Irishman started up nimbly, thrust his crucifix into his bosom, and managed to return the detective's searching glance with one almost as hardy and resolved out of his brave blue eyes.

"How are you now?" asked the detective.

"It's meself again that I am, Mither Walden," was the cheery reply, "though, when I think of the diviltry that had me in its clutch a minute ago, I shouldn't be at all at all surprised to find meself some one else."

Walden gripped his hand, and together they turned to their patient.

To their amazed satisfaction they found him sleeping as calmly and soundly as if the uncanny interruption which they had witnessed and shared had been nothing more than a fleeting nightmare dream.

Perhaps that was all it really was, so far as the invalid's participation in the weird experience was concerned, though its most appalling effects might have been reasonably expected in his case.

At all events, he arose three hours later and ate a hearty breakfast, apparently with no recollection of any disturbing vision, or anything of the sort, and in the most improved condition generally.

"If only the professor could see his H. M. now!" was Malone's enthusiastic comment to the detective. "I'm thinking he wouldn't know him for the same man."

"It is truly wonderful," was the response. "I do not, in fact, see why his daughter should not be brought to him some time to-day, instead of delaying till after the funeral to-morrow, and I shall suggest as much to Mr. Hardman and his nephew. And, at all events, I shall at once telegraph to Doctor Fullgrove this happy result in the gentlemen's condition."

He accordingly did send the dispatch soon after quitting the hotel, and then proceeded to Mr. Hardman's house, where he was so fortunate as to find both uncle and nephew at their late Sunday breakfast.

He stated nothing more than what related to Mr. Marling's improved condition, and then made the suggestion that had prompted his visit.

Horace, who had sat up the greater part of the night as a watcher by the dead, favored it at once, and so did Mr. Hardman, after a little reflection.

"Let it be this afternoon sometime, then," observed the merchant. "I cannot give up my morning church service, and would like greatly to be present when father and daughter come together at last. If all should go well, Mr. Marling might even attend the funeral to-morrow."

"The very thing!" coincided Horace. "It will be an unlooked-for support for Rose on the sad occasion, though I am glad to say she is bearing up already with brave resignation."

"So you've got to speaking of the young lady by her given name?" observed the old gentleman, looking up at him with a quizzical expression. "I wonder if you venture to address her with equal familiarity in the second person."

Horace flushed up, but he answered frankly, and notwithstanding the detective's presence:

"Yes, I do, uncle, and that's a fact! And I am mighty glad it is so."

"Humph!" grumbled Mr. Hardman. "However, I am not making any objections that I am aware of."

"Walden," said Horace, quite abruptly, after a brief pause. "You must be at Miss Marling's apartments, to meet me there, at say four this afternoon."

"What for?" inquired the detective.

"To first break the news to her of this great happiness on the heels of her bereavement."

"Who, I?"

"Of course."

"Oh, no!"

"It must be so! The splendid result is altogether your individual, unsolicited achievement. It is, therefore, only fair and proper that you should make it known to Rose."

"True, true!" interposed Mr. Hardman. "It is practical, no less than poetical, justice. I'll be with Mr. Marling when you bring his daughter to him, you two. And then directly after the funeral to-morrow morning, Horace shall hand over to them the precious packet of papers now in our safe, and which has cost so much peril and bloodshed to preserve inviolate. It

will all be a fitting balm as coming soon after this bereavement of theirs—almost like funeral bells running into wedding chimes, eh?"

It was accordingly so arranged.

Walden merely reported to his chief that day that all was going well, and then he made his call at Miss Marling's apartments at the appointed hour.

One or two of the neighbors were watching over the confined remains in the parlor, and both Rose and Horace were awaiting his arrival in the kitchen, Mrs. Spotswood also being present.

Rose was pale and composed, and there was a sweet sadness in her beauty as set off by the deep mourning which she had already assumed; and there was the restful, solemn hush over the place that is so suggestive to any one

—“Who hath bent him o'er the dead
Ere the last day of death hath sped,
The first dark day of nothingness,
The last of danger and distress,
Before decay's effacing fingers
Have swept the lines where beauty lingers,
And marked the soft, angelic air,
The rapture of repose that's there.”

Miss Marling arose and took the detective's hand.

“Horace says you have something good to tell me, Mr. Walden,” she said, with simple earnestness. “Good news should be acceptable now,” with a faint little tremulous smile. “What is yours?”

“Miss Marling, you once saved me from an awful death,” blurted out Walden, with seeming irrelevance.

“Oh, never mind that now!” she replied, already mystified.

“But I say you did!” half-fiercely, as if some one might venture to dispute his statement—perhaps as a cover to his agitation. “You gave me back to life, that is what you did!”

“Have it so, then, Mr. Walden. What then?”

“In return, I give your father back to you, that's all. I have a way of always paying my debts, after a fashion at least.”

She stared at him blankly.

“My father?” she echoed.

“I'll swear to it, if you want me to.”

“But—alive—well?”

“Perfectly restored, or nearly so, ma'am, and only waiting to take you to his long-suffering heart!”

“Rose, it is true!” interrupted Horace, taking her hand.

“But I—I really do not understand!” she murmured.

Mrs. Spotswood had also risen, clasping her hands.

“All will be made plain shortly, dearest, continued her lover, tenderly—no doubt of his being her lover by this time. “Come; we are to take you to him at once. Mrs. Spotswood will remain, and all will be well here while you are away. Come!”

“Ah!”

Rose reeled a little, and seemed about to faint, though not of the fainting sort.

But she didn't, and a little later she was in her father's arms.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

A FINAL ASTONISHER.

THERE was an elegant little collation in Mr. Jonas Hardman's handsome dining-room, given under extraordinary circumstances, since it was both in quiet celebration of the reunion of Rose Marling with her father, and in the shadow of the sad last funeral rites that were in prospect for the following day.

But the eccentric old bachelor would listen to nothing contrary to his whim in the matter, whether it might be in opposition to the set proprieties or not; and had accordingly borne off both father and daughter from the former's hotel in triumph, of course with both Horace and the detective to bear them company.

Even the faithful but humble Malone was not forgotten, but was utilized as an aproned attendant upon the repast, in lieu of Mr. Hardman's butler, who was having his day off—a service which it is hardly needful to add was altogether congenial with the honest Irishman's inclination.

And, after all, the odd entertainment was more than a half-success even in a social way, if only from the excellent effect which it had upon Mr. Marling's spirits, and the secret delight with which his host perceived it.

Indeed, there bade fair to be a strong friendship cemented between the two men—they were of about the same age—which might be as beneficial to the one in a moral as to the other in a worldly and social way.

Even Mr. Hardman so far unbent his grim practicality as to tell a laughable story or two, a thing which even Horace, who had lived with him since his orphaned childhood, could scarcely find a precedent for.

“It all seems to me like a dream!” exclaimed Mr. Marling, at last. “The dark and miserable past, my separation from my children, even this death of my poor son—all seems un-

real and strange; and I scarcely can be certain that I am here with you all in this bliss and new hope that seem like a foretaste of heaven itself.”

“My dear sir,” cried Mr. Hardman, heartily, “you must just make up your mind to get used to it, and you'll be all right. Malone, fill up Mr. Marling's glass, and he shall again hear me pledge him in this good old port.”

“No, no, not any more for me!” and Mr. Marling placed his hand over his glass in self-defense. “Really, sir, you must remember that my head is scarcely yet what it might have been.”

His daughter, who sat beside him, looked her approval, while Horace and Walden hastened to see Mr. Hardman through with another pledge, for which young Allen, at least, was altogether unprepared.

“All right, then!” cried the old merchant, good-humoredly. “But since Mr. Marling's abstemiousness beats me out of my intended toast, you must not be offended if the substitute I have in readiness surprises you. I give you, then,” and the old gentleman's voice sunk softly, “in all grace and tenderness, and with due respect to the family bereavement she must feel so keenly—my future niece-in-law, Rose Marling!”

Rose flushed and then grew very white, while Horace was likewise embarrassed by the inopportune of the congratulation, however well-intended and delicately worded.

However, the toast was drank in common politeness, though in silence.

“What are you all so glum about?” cried Mr. Hardman, half angrily. “Where was the harm in it?”

“Nowhere especially, uncle,” his nephew ventured to say, “only—Rose's thoughts are naturally elsewhere than here just now.”

“Ah, I had forgotten. My dear Miss Marling, can you forgive my brutish forgetfulness?”

“Oh, sir, but it is nothing! though really I—I think I ought to be getting back.”

“As you think best, my dear. But suppose you go into the drawing-room with Horace and Mr. Walden a few minutes, as I wish to speak a few words to your father.”

When the two elder men were left alone, Mr. Hardman bluntly asked his guest if he would be able to attend the funeral.

“I think so,” replied Mr. Marling, hesitatingly. “That is, I want to do so. What do you think, my friend?”

“If you think you can do so without risk of over-excitement,” said Mr. Hardman, earnestly, “I would advise you to do so by all means.”

“Then I shall go. Malone or Mr. Walden can take me.”

“You mistake. I shall take you,” and he grasped his guest's hand. “Of course, I shall have to take a run down to my place of business first. But my carriage will call for you at ten o'clock sharp.”

Suddenly, and without any warning, Mr. Marling broke down.

“My boy—my poor Ralph!” he sobbed, in a weak, forlorn way. “Even yet I cannot realize that you are gone from me forever. Rose was ever my favorite; yes, I confess it, and your faults were many and radical, but—oh, I must look on your face again, just once again—I must, I must!”

The merchant was scarcely less affected than his guest, and he perhaps began to see now for the first time his lack of judgment, if not good taste, in having insisted on bringing about the gathering at his house under existing circumstances.

“I'm nothing but a coarse old fool,” he growled to himself, “and I don't believe I shall ever be anything else. I suppose it's because I never got married, but that isn't here nor there. Come, my friend.”

And he threw his rough but kind old arm around the poor gentleman, as the latter was rising.

Mr. Marling turned gratefully toward him, more composed, but with eyes that were yet streaming.

“Do not dare to accuse yourself of anything but magnanimity and nobleness, sir!” he exclaimed, passionately. “What have you not done, what are you not doing, for me?—a roken and ruined man. No, no, let me speak, sir. As for my daughter marrying your nephew—easy to see that they are in love!—it must not be thought of. It would be altogether unfair to him and you, sir.”

“Why so, pray?”

And Mr. Hardman was quite composed by this time.

“Can you ask? Look at the name I bear—and which is also borne, or appropriated, by that diabolical criminal-fiend, Max Marling!”

“And which your daughter shall therefore exchange for another—for my nephew's, all in good time. Tush, tush, man, what are names in free America, where every man is what makes of himself? I had a cousin for that matter, who stole a whole railroad, and would have been State-prisoned for it if he hadn't considerably blown out his brains. And you may not believe it, but my own mother's great-great grand-

father was a slaver and pirate of the Spanish Main who was duly hanged at the yard-arm of a British man-o'-war.”

Under the circumstances, Mr. Marling's sense of self-humiliation was somewhat appeased.

The gathering then broke up, Horace accompanying Rose to her home, and her father returning to his hotel attended by Malone and the detective—the latter having resolved to still assist in guarding him until security could be assured.

While finishing a comparatively late breakfast with Mr. Marling on the following morning, a District Telegraph dispatch from Horace Allen was placed in Walden's hands.

It contained these few words:

“Come down to store at once. Fresh villainy.”

“H. A.”

Excusing himself with no appearance of the perturbation he was feeling, the detective hastened down-town.

Both Horace and Mr. Hardman were at the office, besides several policemen and others.

That unfortunate safe!

It could be vaunted as burglar-proof no longer.

There was no surrounding wreck this time, and it presently became obvious that the last attempt had been the clever work of a single criminal.

The solid iron doors had been found neatly blown open and half off their hinges.

A small sum of money in the cash-drawer—about fifty dollars—had not been disturbed.

But one thing was missing.

It was the precious package.

CHAPTER XLIX.

SHORT AND SHARP.

MR. HARDMAN and Horace Allen were among the mourners present at Ralph Marling's funeral that morning.

Wirt Walden, the Holdfast Detective, was not.

And the chase that the latter worked up in pursuit of that package of documents and the master-soundrel who had finally succeeded in capturing it, notwithstanding that he was aided therein by an extraordinary number of fortuitous circumstances, was probably as short and sharp a one as is to be found in the criminal records of New York.

His first step after mastering the details of the burglary was to make a break for the Paradise Saloon by a sort of instinct, and without waiting to consult with his chief.

“I am looking for Major Ludgate,” he peremptorily announced to the bull-necked proprietor, who chanced to be among his assistants behind the bar. “When did you see him last?”

The man knew his questioner well, and might have been expected to evade such a question or laugh at it under ordinary circumstances; but now, not a little to Walden's surprise, he answered promptly, and with seeming straightforwardness:

“He was here last night, Holdfast, and seeming to be out of sorts, at that.”

“Thank you, Gubbins. Do you know where he lodges?”

“I know where he did lodge before he left town a week or less ago.”

“Where?”

Mr. Gubbins mentioned a cheap sporting hotel of shady reputation on upper Eighth avenue.

Thanking him, Walden turned to go, and then, retracing his steps, beckoned the Paradise proprietor apart.

“You seem to be uncommonly complacent this morning, Gubbins,” he observed.

“Oh, I can pass a pleasant word even with a fly-cop on occasion,” responded Mr. Gubbins, with his gorilla smile. “What will you drink?”

“Nothing, thanks. But will you satisfy my curiosity on a certain point?”

“That depends.”

“Why are you so unusually complacent, then?”

“Aha! The major is wanted, isn't he?”

“Yes.”

“Well, the Silver Gangsters were some of 'em pretty good friends of mine.”

“Yes.”

“And they were snatched up pretty quick—in fact a little too quick to look quite natural.”

“Ah! and it is suspected that the major condescended to ‘leak’ in order to help himself out?”

“You've got it,” and Mr. Gubbins quietly resumed his station behind the bar.

This seemed almost too good to be true, but the detective lost no time in hastening to the Eighth avenue address.

The proprietor was something of the Gubbins order, and it was quickly apparent that the Corpulent Mystery was in as bad standing with him as with his fellow rum-seller.

“The major went to his room at six o'clock this morning,” he replied, in answer to the detective's inquiries. “Then I went up and ordered him out. He went without a word; don't know nor care a curse where he went, and never want to see him again.”

"He probably owed you for his room?"
 "Not a cent."
 "Why did you order him away then?"
 "For two reasons, Mr. Walden. In the first place, the major is no good," and he accompanied the words with a significant glance.
 "I understand. He's suspected of having leaked?"

An affirmative nod.
 "Well, your second reason?"
 "I fancy that he isn't quite himself."
 Gubbins had also spoken of the ponderous fugitive looking out of sorts.
 "Pray explain, old fellow."

The proprietor tapped his forehead with his forefinger.

"Besides," he went on, "he breathes hard, his face changes suddenly from white to purple, and back again, and his eyes ain't right. Holy smoke! impatiently; "what else can you expect of a man as big around as a hogshead, and with no neck?"

"Ah! and do you always turn out your lodgers when they are threatened with illness?"
 "When they're N. G.—yes."

"Can you give me an idea as to where he most likely went from here?"

"No, I can't; but I wouldn't if I could."

Between this time and the middle of the afternoon, Walden got on the faint track of his man as many as a dozen times, but only to lose it as often.

Notwithstanding the fugitive's extraordinary breadth of figure, his cleverness or good-luck, whichever it might be, seemed to be standing by him to the last.

But even this successful hide-and-seek on the part of such a man—if indeed his elusion of his pursuer was altogether intentional, of which there was more than a doubt in the detective's mind—was less remarkable than the comparatively forlorn and dazed condition in which it seemed, on the report of his whilom pals, or confederates, he was finding himself.

Indeed, it would almost seem as if he had perpetrated this last burglary in a fit of defiance, or of grim, desperate protest against a species of ostracism that had been suddenly declared upon him by his own kind—whether deserved or not—among whom he had but recently moved the master and a lurid star.

It was about the last species of a Nemesis that such a villain might have anticipated.

The man, but of late a prince of scoundrels, was a wanderer, without a friend.

Even his threatening physical collapse—the rue cause of which was more than merely suspected by his pursuer—seemed to have come upon him with a sort of swoop, and probably in the fullness of his extraordinary powers, and at the very moment when he should have had most need of their exercise—perhaps directly after his burglary had been so consummately and self-reliantly effected.

Where was his wonderful and occult power now—which might have been hurled out behind him as an insurmountable bulwark in this his hour of bitterest need? Or, indeed, might those recent exceptional manifestations of its baleful exertion, even when separated from his "subject" or subjects, by a wide interval of space, have even contributed to its deterioration—even as a deadly serpent may fatally wound itself with its own fang in the recoil from a too hasty and powerful lashing-out from the assured spiral of its preparatory coil?

The strange, blind sort of pursuit at last led the detective to the far northern part of the island, until at last, from vague intimations and yet vaguer deductions, he strangely enough found himself in the vicinity of the scene of his most deadly personal peril—the blackened ruins of the old mansion in the neighborhood of Spuyten Duyvil.

Remembering the door of the underground fastness communicating with the face of the bluff, he set himself to looking for it, though with scarcely a hope of finding a more certain clew of his fugitive in the cave, which had doubtless been permanently abandoned directly after the firing of the house.

He made the discovery without much difficulty—an overgrown hole in the bluff-front directly overlooking the railroad tracks below and the great river beyond, and with its inner door forlornly fallen or broken away from its fastenings.

On a narrow outer ledge near the outer aperture sat a miserable-looking figure, suggesting both the criminal and the tramp, the chin buried in the ragged breast, the eyes stonily fixed upon vacancy.

The detective laid his iron hand on the man's shoulder, calling him by name.

It was a slang or criminal name—the name of one of the last of the Silver Gang.

"Ha! it's Holdfast," grunted the fellow, looking up indifferently.

"Yes," was the reply, but without any severity of voice or manner; "yes, Splasher, it is I."

"What of it? You can't want me."

"No; but some one else."

"The major, eh?" And the man looked up somewhat eagerly, his evil face darkening over.

"Yes."

"Well, he was in yonder an hour ago, but

went off again. If you don't believe it, you can look for yourself."

Walden did take a look through the subterranean chamber, but rather as a matter of form, and without making any discovery.

"Where did he go from here?" he demanded, on his return to the rascal's side.

"To hell, I hope!"

"Answer me, if you can!" sternly.

"But I really don't know, Holdfast," growled the man, discontentedly. "Like enough downtown again; at least he strayed off that-away. But what's the difference! It's only to get a knife in his ribs sooner or later. If the best men of the Silvers weren't in quod," with a reappearance of the black look, "he'd have had it there before this, curse him."

"I don't believe that the major sold them out, as seems to be the general impression."

"You don't, eh?" with a sneer. "Well, that's all you know about it, fly-cop as you are!"

"What else have you to tell me, Splasher? Come; I'm in a hurry."

"So am I—for a drink or a bite. Haven't had one nor t'other for two days."

The detective dropped a silver dollar in his grimy paw.

"Thank you, Holdfast! That ain't bad. The major looks upset, then; that is really all I can tell you of him, for it is really about all I know."

"How does he look?"

"Oh, you know—gone in! I doubt if he even recognized me when he was nosing about here. His pretty clothes were muddy, one of his boots was busted at the side, and he kept muttering a name over to himself."

"What name?"

"You remember Handsome Nell of the Silvers—the shoplifter that was always so sweet on the major?"

"Yes!" eagerly.

"That was the name."

The detective hurried away without another word.

The woman and her haunts were equally familiar to him.

An hour later, as the chill early-winter dusk was settling down over the great city, the detective confronted a modest-appearing young girl in an upper Sixth avenue tenement.

"Where is your sister?" he demanded, peremptorily. "You needn't look frightened, Jenny. It isn't Nell herself I'm after."

"Honor bright, Mr. Walden?"

"Honor bright!"

"But whom may you be wanting?"

"Ludgate."

"Nell is with him now. They're over yonder in Kelly's."

"What! in the open saloon?"

"No; more likely in the big back room, though that ought to be pretty full by this time."

"Thank you, Jen. I'll remember this to your advantage when you are next in trouble."

Before the door of the saloon in question, two policemen had just saluted each other in passing.

Walden gave them a significant sign, and then passed swiftly into the main saloon, which was more or less crowded with tipplers, while a more subdued clink of glasses came from the adjoining back room.

The detective, regardless of numerous black looks cast upon him from various quarters—for the place was a notorious criminal resort—passed directly to the communicating door, and peered within.

Yes; there he was at last, and much as he had been described—forlorn, dazed, travel-soiled, a new and brutish look in his massive face; apparently little more than stupidly conscious of the glass of liquor at his elbow, and of the handsome, though reckless-faced young woman sitting at the same round table with him.

A woman, as a matter of course. And is it ever otherwise with the worst or wretchedest of us, in the last depths of our degradation and despair? If companioned at all, it is ever by a woman, to give the final hand-clasp, the last smile, or to close the dying eyes with her softer touch!

The detective looked but once, then strode into the room, brushed the girl to one side, and laid his hand roughly upon the giant's shoulder.

"I want you!"

Max looked up dazedly at first, then with a rush of back-flickering intelligence and power.

Then, notwithstanding the revolver's muzzle clapped squarely against his forehead, he leaped to his feet like a cat, and with a sort of hoarse, animal-like roar.

Then his arm and hand went straight out with the old mesmeric quiver and swift passes.

But in vain! there was a slight, paltry shock, and then the deteriorated magnetism, once so potent and supreme, was spent and gone.

Click! the terrible handcuffs—of exceptional weight and strength—were on his wrists at last; while the two policemen were already at the communicating doors, to keep back the crowd.

The master-villain staggered back, raising

his manacled hands over his head, his face, which had turned pale at first, slowly becoming purple.

Then there was a cry from the girl, and he was on his back, shaking the house to its foundations with the crash of his fall, and terrible even in his unconsciousness.

"A doctor!" commanded the detective, bending over his prisoner, and tearing open his collar.

One of the officers was away and back again, with a physician, in short order.

The prisoner's stertorous breathing had suddenly ceased, and the physician's examination, though critical, was consequently brief.

"Nothing to be done," was his verdict. "Apoplexy—dead!"

Then the detective made his examination, duly possessed himself of the stolen package of papers, and was gone, after leaving certain directions with regard to the corpse.

So it strangely chanced that on the evening of the same day whose morning had witnessed their evanishment beheld the papers returned into the possession of Rose Marling and her father.

"Thank the Lord!" fervently exclaimed Mr. Hardman, who, together with Horace Allen, was present at the restoration, and as a listener to the story that accompanied it, and there was something almost ludicrous in his solemnity. "Then my office safe may be permitted to take a rest at last!"

CHAPTER L.

CONCLUSION.

"WALDEN," commented Inspector Byrnes, upon receiving the Holdfast Detective's final report, "you've wound up this affair very creditably. When the next sergeant's vacancy occurs on my staff, I'll back you for the place. Has Mr. Hardman done anything individually for you yet?"

"Not yet, inspector."

But the next morning a very substantial recognition of the detective's services was placed in his hand by the old merchant, in the shape of a handsome bank check, and Mr. Hardman was not stinted in the words of praise that accompanied it.

And this wasn't bad, the detective thought, especially as the interview was in full sight of the much-abused safe, upon whose battered doors the workmen were still busy at their repairs.

"I rather think I'll get another one," cogitated Mr. Hardman, scratching his head, "or perhaps have a regular money-vault built as a substitute. Somehow or other that safe seems to be sort of unfortunate."

With aid of the restored documents, Mr. Marling ultimately succeeded in establishing his claim to the valuable railroad stocks referred to, and, better still, in reestablishing his reputation among his former business associates.

Then, as his health improved steadily, both mentally and physically, he again ventured into business life in New York, and with moderate success, chiefly through the rich merchant's friendship, and this agreeable relationship endured to the end of their lives.

Rose and Horace were duly married on the New Year's day succeeding the last tragedy in their strange and peril-embarrassed courtship.

The marriage was in Grace Church, and it was a grand high society affair. The conjugal felicity that succeeded it has been exceptional.

Three years later old Mr. Hardman died, leaving his nephew sole heir to his vast wealth. Since then the couple have spent much of their time abroad, with their two children—a boy and a girl; though they have both country and town residences in New York, which is still their home, and where Rose is no less beloved for her unostentatious charities than is her happy young husband popular among his set.

Mrs. Spotswood is still with Rose as her companion.

The Holdfast Detective was steadily rising in his profession when last heard from, and will doubtless live to make his mark in many another celebrated case.

Such geniuses as Wirt Walden are never born to greatness, nor are they apt to have it thrust upon them.

It is almost invariably the outcome of their own achievements.

THE END.

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- 769 Buffalo Bill's Sweepstake.
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- 667 Buffalo Bill's Swoop; or, The King of the Mines.
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- 644 Buffalo Bill's Bonanza; or, Silver Circle Knights.
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- 329 Buffalo Bill's Pledge; or, The League of Three.
- 189 Wild Bill's Gold Trail; or, The Desperate Dozen.
- 175 Wild Bill's Trump Card; or, The Indian Heiress.
- 168 Wild Bill, the Pistol Dead Shot.

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- 807 Wild Bill, the Wild West Duelist.
- 800 Wild Bill, the Dead-Center Shot.
- 689 Buffalo Bill's Gold King.
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- 414 Red Renard, the Indian Detective.
- 401 One-Armed Pard; or, Borderland Retribution.
- 397 The Wizard Brothers; or, White Beaver's Trail.
- 394 White Beaver, the Exile of the Platte.
- 319 Wild Bill, the Whirlwind of the West.
- 304 Texas Jack, the Prairie Rattler.
- 243 The Pilgrim Sharp; or, The Soldier's Sweetheart.
- 83 Gold Bullet Sport; or, Knights of the Overland.
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- 629 Buffalo Bill's Daring Role; or, Daredeath Dick.
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- 158 Buffalo Bill, Chief of Scouts.
- 117 Buffalo Bill's Strange Pard; or, Dashing Dandy.
- 92 Buffalo Bill, the Buckskin King.

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- 790 Plunger Pete, the Race-Track Detective.
- 774 Steve Starr, the Dock Detective.
- 764 The New York Sharp's Shadower.
- 738 Detective Claxton, the Record Breaker.
- 714 Gabe Gall, the Gambolier from Great Hump.
- 703 Spokane Saul, the Samaritan Suspect.
- 692 Dead Shot Paul, the Deep-Range Explorer.
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- 646 Dark John, the Grim Guard.
- 638 Murdock, the Dread Detective.
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- 611 Alkali Abe, the Game Chicken from Texas.
- 596 Rustler Rube; the Round-Up Detective.
- 585 Dan Dixon's Double.
- 575 Steady Hand, the Napoleon of Detectives.
- 563 Wyoming Zeke, the Hotspur of Honey-suckle.
- 551 Garry Kean, the Man with Backbone.
- 539 Old Doubledark, the Wily Detective.
- 531 Saddle-Chief Kit, the Prairie Centaur.
- 521 Paradise Sam, the Nor'-West Pilot.
- 513 Texas Tartar, the Man With Nine Lives.
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- 479 Gladiator Gabe, the Samson of Sassajack.
- 470 The Duke of Dakota.
- 463 Gold Gauntlet, the Gulch Gladiator.
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- 442 Wild West Walt, the Mountain Veteran.
- 437 Deep Duke; or, The Man of Two Lives.
- 427 The Rivals of Montana Mill.
- 415 Hot Heart, the Detective Spy.
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- 297 Colorado Rube, the Strong Arm of Hotspur.
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- 742 Detective Burr Among the New York Thugs.
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- 618 Kansas Karl, the Detective King.
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- 628 Huckleberry, the Foot-Hills Detective.

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- 780 The Dead Sport's Double.
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- 661 The Get-There Sharp.
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- 588 Sandy Sands, the Sharp from Snap City.
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- 564 The Grip-Sack Sharp; or, The Seraphs of Sodom.
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- 541 Major Magnet, the Man of Nerve.
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- 537 Dandy Andy, the Diamond Detective.
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- 433 Laughing Leo; or, Sam's Dandy Pard.
- 426 The Ghost Detective; or, The Secret Service Spy.
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- 387 Dark Durg, the Ishmael of the Hills.
- 379 Howling Jonathan, the Terror from Headwaters.
- 372 Captain Crisp, the Man with a Record.
- 367 A Royal Flush; or, Dan Brown's Big Game.
- 360 Jumping Jerry, the Gamecock from Sundown.
- 355 Stormy Steve, the Mad Athlete.
- 351 Nor' West Nick, the Border Detective.
- 345 Masked Mark, the Mounted Detective.
- 339 Spread Eagle Sam, the Hercules Hide Hunter.
- 331 Chispa Charley, the Gold Nugget Sport.
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- 286 Pistol Johnny; or, One Man in a Thousand.
- 283 Sleek Sam, the Devil of the Mines.
- 257 Death Trap Diggings; or, A Man 'Way Back.
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- 154 Joaquin, the Saddle King.
- 141 Equinox Tom, the Bully of Red Rock.
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- 490 The Lone Hand in Texas.
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